BLACK BULLET
AGAINST A PERFECT SNIPER
2
SHIDEN KANZAKI
ILLUSTRATION BY SAKI UKAI

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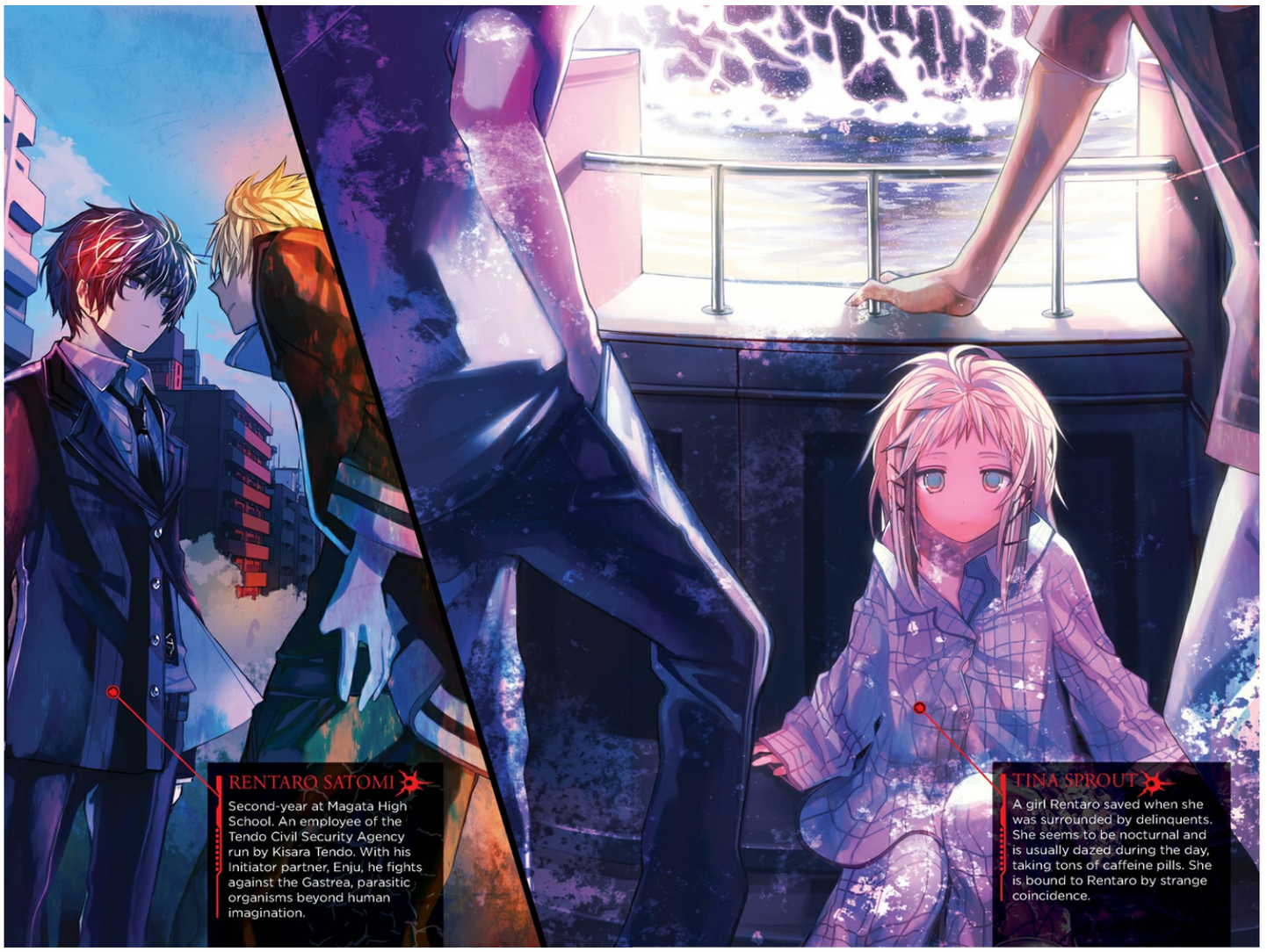
RENTARO SATOMI
Second-year at Magata High School. An employee of the Tendo Civil Security Agency run by Kisara Tendo. With his Initiator partner, Enju, he fights against the Gastrea, parasitic organisms beyond human imagination.
TINA SPROUT
A girl Rentaro saved when she was surrounded by delinquents. She seems to be nocturnal and is usually dazed during the day, taking tons of caffeine pills. She is bound to Rentaro by strange coincidence.

MIORI SHIBA
Daughter of the CEO of Shiba Heavy Weapons. She goes to Magata High School with Rentaro and is the student council president. As a quasi-patron, she supplies Rentaro with weapons and equipment. She and Kisara get along like cats and dogs.
KISARA TENDO
A former rich girl who was born into the prestigious Tendo family, but for her own reasons, she left home to become independent. Although she attends school and runs the Tendo Civil Security Agency at the same time, she's been forced into poverty. She is the girl Rentaro yearns for.
ENJU AIHARA
One of the Cursed Children, who have the Gastrea virus inside their bodies. A precocious ten-year-old hiding superhuman powers. She's very attached to her partner, Rentaro Satomi, treating him like a lover, and she views the well-endowed Kisara Tendo as her rival in love.

NEAR THE ROOF OF THE BUILDING, FOR A SPLIT SECOND,
THERE WAS A GLINT OF SOMETHING.
SURROUNDED BY THE SOUND OF BREAKING GLASS AND
THE SQUEAL OF THE EMERGENCY BRAKES
ON THE LIMOUSINE, THE SEITENSHI STARTED TO SCREAM.
A SNIPER INSIDE THE CITY?
"ENJU! GET OUT.
"RENTARO!"
TAKE THE DRIVER WITH YOU."
SEITENSHI
Ruler of Tokyo Area, one of the five areas Japan was divided into after the Gastrea War. Sixteen years old. With her otherworldly beauty, kind heart, and noble will, she has much support from the masses.

BLACK BULLET 2
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VOLUME 2

BLACK BULLET

AGAINST A PERFECT SNIPER

2

SHIDEN KANZAKI

ILLUSTRATIONS BY SAKI UKAI

YEN ON
NEW YORK

PROLOGUE THE MINEWORKERS

With his future and his freedom at stake, Tsunehiro Koboshi ran as fast as he could. He had already run five kilometers, occasionally looking back and checking on his pursuers as he went. Running past the sunflowers on the roadside, he saw that the road had become a single straight path. All he could see was forest, and he sensed fewer and fewer people around, which made him uneasy. His muscles were tight and his clothes felt gross, plastered to his skin with sweat. This distance was hard to bear for a normal human who wasn't one of the Cursed Children.

Suddenly, Tsunehiro remembered how a middle school classmate had tapped his shoulder lightly with a fist and a laugh, saying, "You need more stamina." That was exactly what he needed.

"Tsunehiro, are you okay?"

He shot a glance at the girl running alongside him. Three years younger than he, she was wearing the same work clothes as he was, which were slightly dirty all over. However, she was not panting at all, and her anxious eyes were wine-red. She had the same red eyes as the Gastrea.

"I-I'm…fine… What…about you…Shuri…?" he asked, wiping his pouring sweat furiously as he spoke.

Shuri gave a slight nod.

He forced strength into his knees, which felt like they were about to give out, and gritted his teeth. His life was not just his own anymore. Now that he had gotten her involved, he could not allow himself to give up.

Knowing that was the one thing he could *not* do, he looked back. He couldn't see their pursuers, but he knew for sure that they were behind them. Fear pierced Tsunehiro, and abruptly he tripped over his own tangled legs and tumbled on the ground.

As Shuri hurried to a stop, she glared at their enemies who were firing at them

from behind. “Tsunehiro, run away while I’m fighting them off!”

Turning, he saw that Shuri was facing the enemy. “Y-you can’t, Shuri! You can’t fight that Initiato—”

Before Tsunehiro could finish, Shuri was thrown along the surface of the road toward him with a loud sound. Tsunehiro paled. Thinking about how frighteningly strong this Initiator must be for Shuri to not even stand a chance, he went to help her up, and they continued with their escape.

After a while, he saw an enormous structure in front of them. At first, he couldn’t tell what it was, but after seeing the round gondolas and the silhouettes of rails in the air peeking through the wall, he slowly realized that it was an amusement park. Behind them were civsec officers, and in front of them was a dead end. Tsunehiro had a hunch that his short escape act would soon be over, and he gritted his teeth. He couldn’t let it end here.

He and Shuri, who was running next to him, looked at each other and nodded, then hopped over the amusement park’s automatic turnstile. He saw a look of surprise come over the worker’s face and apologized silently. If they let themselves get lost in the crowd, they might still have a chance. That’s what he thought, but as they landed inside, Tsunehiro was dumbfounded.

There was no one in the silent street, and the rides that turned round and round were almost completely empty. Part of it might have been because it was a weekday evening, but it was just too deserted. There were no crowds to get lost in here…

He looked behind him and gave a start. The Initiator who had been chasing Tsunehiro and Shuri had jumped over the turnstile and appeared in front of them. She wore a fancy coat with checkered lining and a miniskirt. She had thick-soled lace-up shoes and pigtails tied with largish hair ties that swayed slightly left and right.

With the setting sun at her back, she walked toward them, making a large *X* with her arms above her head. “Committing crimes is an absolute no-no! I will not allow it!”

Behind her, a woman who looked like the girl’s Promoter appeared, riding a bike. She went to the side of the turnstile entrance and thrust something that

looked like an ID (probably her civsec license) at the worker, getting off her bike and flipping her black hair. She was a surprisingly beautiful young woman. What in the world was she?

"Enju, good work." Saying that, the young woman turned to face Tsunehiro. "You're Tsunehiro Koboshi and Shuri Nazawa, right? Per our client's orders, we, the Tendo Civil Security Agency, are taking you into custody."

The Tendo Civil Security Agency…? The name sounded familiar, so he racked his brain, and then gave a start when he realized. "Th-the Tendo Civil Security Agency……? Th-the real Tendo Civil Security Agency?"

"Wait, what? You know who we are?" She leaned forward and looked at him with expectant eyes.

"Of course I know who you are…" The saviors who defeated the Stage Five when Tokyo Area was on the brink of destruction. Those saviors were part of the Tendo Civil Security Agency.

For fear of assassination, kidnapping, or headhunting from another country, their personal information was quickly placed under a media blackout, but not before just the name of the savior, *Rentaro Satomi*, had spread around the mine along with a lot of speculation.

The young woman, her mood now thoroughly improved, put her hand to her face with a dainty laugh. "That's right. We are the Tendo Civil Security Agency, and I am the president, Kisara Tendo. And you two were lured here because this is the amusement park where Satomi works part-time."

Rentaro Satomi—

Tsunehiro staggered with shock, and Shuri's body shook. A celebrated, legendary civsec officer worked *here*?

The female president waved her arms with a flourish. "Just look! This is the pride of the Tendo Civil Security Agency, our strongest Promoter, Satomi!"

Tsunehiro and Shuri fell to their knees, still hugging each other. This was the end. Tsunehiro squeezed his eyes shut and waited for his last breath.

However, no matter how long he waited, nothing happened.

When Tsunehiro opened one eye and looked at the female president, she said, “Th-that’s strange, I heard he was working here…” Blushing, she turned to the girl next to her. “Enju, do you know where in the park Satomi works?”

“I have no knowledge of that. Many times I have said I want to come see him, but he always says, ‘You can’t come!’ so I never found out.”

When the two of them started looking around them, Tsunehiro also shifted his gaze to his surroundings. The amusement park as a whole was silent, with no sign of people anywhere—No, that wasn’t true. If he looked carefully, there was just one place where there was a crowd of people.

Children were gathered around a magical girl.

More accurately, young elementary schoolers were aiming at someone dressed in a magical girl costume, kicking and hitting all at once. It was the unpopular character, “Tenchu Violet,” from the cartoon *Tenchu Girls*, which told the story of forty-seven magical girls.

“Get ’er!”

“Just die already.”

“Gah-ha-ha!”

“Kill ’er! Kill ’er!”

It wasn’t clear what made them despise her so much, but the children single-mindedly beat on Violet like they were possessed. A muffled scream could be heard from the depths of the magical girl’s smiling head as she was straddled and kicked.

The female president made a disgusted face. “Don’t tell me……”

“Aaaarrgggggghhhhhhhh, aaah, get the fuck off me!” Suddenly, the magical girl spewed unbelievably nasty words.

The children froze and looked around, but of course, there was no one else around.

As Violet rose slowly and put her hand on her neck, a young man appeared from inside her, panting and covered with sweat. He had an unpleasant look in his eyes and a sour expression on his face. “Be a little nicer, you little brats! I’m

gonna smack you!”

At first, the children were in a state of shock, but suddenly, starting with a child near the young man, the children started one by one to wet themselves in fear.

“Violet died…!”

“I’m scared!”

“Something weird came out from inside her!”

“Hey, don’t cry! I said, don’t cry! Violet is still alive. ‘See? I’m a magical girl!’…… Aw, shit! That’s right, I’m an alien larva born by tearing through Violet’s stomach. Sorry about that, damn it!” The young man threw Violet’s head and magical stick on the ground and slowly walked toward Tsunehiro and the others. He was still a magical girl from the neck down.

That can’t be Rentaro Satomi, Tsunehiro thought doubtfully.

The female president crossed her arms. “Satomi, you’re late! You are supposed to come right when I call!”

Rentaro scratched his hair and complained in a dispirited voice. “You might say that, Kisara, but even after I risked my life to save Tokyo Area, why do I get paid less than a part-time convenience store clerk? Because of that, I had to take this part-time job where I become a human punching bag, you know.”

“You are to call me ‘President’ on the job. Besides, it’s your fault, Satomi. After you defeated the Stage Five, the Gastreas’ movements have died down, and we’ve had way less jobs. We haven’t been able to resolve a single case properly since that incident, you know. We have zero income this month, too, because of *someone*. Do you get that, zero-dependability *Satomi*?”

The young man let out a scream as if he had been poked somewhere painful, and he drew in his chin. Then, he noticed Tsunehiro and Shuri. “Well, what are these guys?”

“Targets to capture.”

“Targets to capture? Is this a job from the government?”

“No, the client is a civsec officer.”

“Do civsec officers hire other civsec officers?”

“Well, it’s not unusual.”

“What, like a subcontractor?” Rentaro complained listlessly, then leaned over to look at Tsunehiro.

“Well, what did you guys do?”

Tsunehiro and Shuri looked at each other, then said, “Actually…” and told them about what happened that led them to run away.

Tsunehiro told them about how his father racked up a lot of debt, until one day, when Tsunehiro went home, there were yakuza in his house. The yakuza threatened him, saying, “Boy, tomorrow, you won’t be able to go to middle school anymore.” Just like that, he was brought to where the yakuza were illegally mining Varanium behind a front company.

He told them about how at the Varanium mine in the Unexplored Territory, he was made to labor hopelessly in the mine day after day. Perhaps it could be said that birds of a feather flock together, but the civsec officers that they got to guard the mine were all good-for-nothings, and they seemed to be mostly concerned with making sure their fellow civsec officers didn’t run away.

He told them about how a fellow laborer was killed in a lynching. About how he met Shuri, and how they were able to start thinking about escaping. And then, about how they finally found an opening and stole a jeep, driving it crazily without stopping for rest, and barely making it into the Monoliths.

“Hmm, they are not bad guys at all, are they?” When Enju said this, Rentaro and Kisara looked embarrassed.

“What should we do, President?” Rentaro asked, after a pause.

“How am I supposed to know…? Besides, I already contacted the client on the way here to say we found them……”

“The client?”

There was a *whoosh* of feathers, and something slammed into the ground at Tsunehiro’s feet with amazing speed.

It was the arrow from a crossbow.

“Found you, you damn brats!”

When Tsunehiro turned, he looked as if he was about to scream.

The shooter unwillingly lowered his crossbow in his right hand with unconcealed hatred in the piercing, narrow eyes of his stern, craggy face.

It was Haga. He was the embodiment of fear in the Varanium mine they had run away from, a terrifying Promoter who had killed three workers just because he didn’t like them.

Haga licked his lips, staring with his reptilian eyes. “You’ve got some nerve running away like that. Prepare yourself, you little bastards. I’m gonna kill you dead and feed your corpses to the pigs.”

They had to run. Despite his thoughts, Tsunehiro was frozen in fear, and his legs wouldn’t move.

Haga aimed his crossbow deliberately and put his finger on the trigger.

“Hey, wait a sec, old man.” Rentaro interjected. “Are you the civsec officer client? Where’s your Initiator?”

Haga slid his gaze to the side, seeming to notice Rentaro for the first time. “I’ll pay you later, so shut up, you runt.”

“I said, where’s your Initiator, moron?” Rentaro looked at Haga without blinking.

Startled, Haga was the one who shifted his gaze first. “Damn. Oh yeah, now that you mention it, I had one. She cried and screamed so much I accidentally killed her, but well, I said she died in the line of duty, so the IISO will send me a replacement soon—”

“Tendo Martial Arts First Style, Number 3—”

“Huh?”

“Rokuro Kabuto!”

Rentaro’s fist buried itself in the unguarded Haga’s face, flattening his features, destroying three of his front teeth, and throwing him back almost three meters as blood flowed from his nose. Then, there was complete silence.

“What the hell?! You’re a disgrace to civsec officers, you bastard! Don’t show your face in front of me again. If I see you again and you’re still a civsec officer, I’m gonna friggin’ kill you!” After swearing vigorously, Rentaro’s body suddenly became stiff for some reason, and he turned toward Kisara with his shoulders hunched apologetically. “Sorry, I did it again…”

“Hey Satomi, what’re you doing knocking out our client?! How many times do you think we’ve lost our chance to get paid? If you’re going to punch him, punch him *after* we get paid!” Kisara said.

“*That’s* what you’re worried about?!”

Left out of the action, Tsunehiro felt his mouth hang open. Had he just been saved…by the civsec officer?

Borrowing a notepad and pen from Kisara, Rentaro wrote something down and put the piece of paper in Tsunehiro’s hand.

“Make an appearance at the homicide department here, in front of an inspector named Tadashima. That guy’s not prejudiced against Cursed Children, so he’ll probably help you. You might have to face consequences for driving without a license, but there were a lot of extenuating circumstances. Oh, but be careful. That inspector’s got a face on him that’ll make the yakuza look like Buddha.”

“U-um… I…” Tsunehiro was at a loss for words. When he lifted his face, thinking he had to say something, he was interrupted by Kisara’s phone.

“Satomi, it’s been a while, but we’ve got some prey,” she said after she hung up. “A Stage One Gastrea was sighted in Tokyo Area District 23! It looks like it went astray from a high altitude.”

Rentaro looked fed up. “Wait, Kisara. We’re in District 11, right…? Will you get us a car or something?”

Kisara righted the bicycle, straddled the saddle, put her feet on the pedals, and turned around. “Don’t say stupid things. We don’t have money for that! You’re! Running! Right! Now!”

Looking down, Rentaro confirmed that he was still a magical girl from the neck down. “Then help me out here. The zipper’s broken on this thing, so I can’t unzip

it from the inside.”

Kisara and Enju looked at each other and grinned wickedly.

“It looks good on you, Satomi,” said Kisara.

“It becomes you, Rentaro,” said Enju.

Rentaro hung his head dejectedly. “Give me a break……”

In the slowly growing darkness, Tsunehiro watched the young man in costume with a girl following him like a puppy fade away with their long shadows, and a young woman on a bike following them yelling into a megaphone.

People who accomplished their justice without wishing for anything in return. “That’s…a real civsec officer.”

The flame of longing was lit, and feelings welled up in his chest. Making a fist so hard it hurt, he turned back to Shuri. “Shuri, I want to be a civsec officer when I grow up. So, um…if you’d like, I want you to be my Initiator!”

Shuri was surprised and widened her eyes for a moment, but then she shyly tilted her head. “If that’s what you want, Tsunehiro.”

Her smile was so bright that Tsunehiro turned red up to his ears. Averting his eyes in embarrassment, he gazed at the shadows that were growing smaller.

The year 2031. Earth’s surviving population: 750 million.

Officially registered International Initiator Supervision Organization (IISO) civsec officer pairs: 2.4 million pairs.

A declining world huddled inside the Monoliths, walking quietly down the path to destruction.

Initiators and Promoters. Fighting together in pairs.

Using the power cultivated in their bodies to fight the Gastrea—they are humanity’s last hope.

BLACK BULLET 2
CHAPTER 01

VARANIUM WAR

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CHAPTER 01

VARANIUM WAR

1

Kisara Tendo stood in the middle of the tatami-floored dojo filled with the cool morning air, wearing her black sailor-school uniform. The soft morning light sparkled on her straight, too-black hair, throwing small shadows behind her.

She stood with her eyes closed and her hips low, with her hand on the grip of her sword. She had already been in this position for ten minutes: The Tendo Martial Arts Sword Drawing Style, Nirvana Stance. The stance meant being in the midst of a state of constant change and existing freely in that state. It was a stance that encompassed all the offense and defense of the Tendo Martial Arts Sword Drawing Style.

She's beautiful, thought Rentaro from the bottom of his heart as he looked up at his fellow pupil, at the same time unable to suppress a shudder. There was not a single opening in her stance, and there was something about it that made Rentaro certain that the moment he stepped within reach of her blade, he would be cut down. Rentaro discreetly took his smartphone from his pocket and looked at its LCD screen. It was almost time to leave for school. She would move soon.

Just as he thought, there was almost no need for him to wait.

Kisara exhaled softly, and her clear voice rang out. "Tendo Martial Arts Sword Drawing First Style, Number 1—" Her scabbard rang, and her sword was unsheathed with the speed of a lightning bolt: "*Tekisui Seihyou.*"

The slash made an extremely modest whoosh. But the top half of the target in

front of Kisara—a carved wooden target wrapped in cloth—was blown off with a destructive blast, and pieces of it flew into the dojo's walls. The most astonishing thing of all was that there was a distance of more than six meters between Kisara and the target.

Rentaro gulped. The striking distance of a sword catapulted by its sheath to accelerate when drawn was equal to the length of the sword plus the length of the swordsman's arm and step.

However, the Tendo sword-drawing technique has something more than that. It was not like Rentaro had seen all of Kisara's techniques, but he knew that she could slash up to three times her striking distance. And this was data from three years ago…

Standing up quickly, Rentaro clapped as he approached her, throwing her a towel. Kisara, whose face was haggard from the intense mental concentration this had required, said, "Thanks," and wiped her face with the towel.

"That was incredible sword speed as usual, Miss Master Initiate President."

Kisara stuck her chin in the air primly. "Don't call me *President* when we're not working. And if you think that, you should be more diligent, First Dan Satomi."

"That was helpful. Even if the Sword Drawing Styles and Martial Arts Styles are different, they are all Tendo techniques, so there were a lot of things I could learn from that. You were seriously in a state of enlightenment just now."

Kisara did not seem dissatisfied as she chuckled and lifted the hair above her neck. "You know, I'm sorry to disappoint you, but there is no enlightenment in the path of the sword. Apparently the moment you think you have reached enlightenment, deception and vanity are born and cloud your sword. And when I rose to master initiate level, Master Sukekiyo looked at me and said, 'Your sword is so rusted, it's sad. I will make you a master initiate taking that into consideration.'"

"……that demonic old man. He's still alive?"

"He'll be an active one hundred and twenty years old this year."

"Damn, he should just commit seppuku already…"

“But thanks to him, I didn’t become too prideful. Now that I’m honing my mental spirit like this, I understand that there is still a lot that I can achieve.” A fearless look crossed Kisara’s face as she started to put away the target.

Watching her, Rentaro pouted, feeling pitiful. She didn’t need to become strong. He would protect her.

Then, he realized. Rentaro thought she had been using her usual sword-drawing practice sword, but although the black scabbard and base and red cord looked similar, this was a real sword. “The murderous blade, Yukikage, huh…?”

“That’s right.” As Kisara stopped working and looked at him, she dusted off the scabbard and held it up to the sunlight coming in through the window. Bathed in the morning sun, the wavy temper pattern on the blade scattered the light, filled with a charm that drew in all who looked at it.

Kisara looked at the blade absentmindedly and murmured, “Satomi, did I ever tell you what ‘murderous blade’ means?”

“No…”

“In Zen, it’s the opposite of the life-saving sword; it negates all human delusion. This…is the sword that will hunt down all the Tendos, Satomi.”

Rentaro made a fist where Kisara couldn’t see, his eyes flashing. Should he point out that Kisara, enthralled by the light of the murderous blade, also seemed to be possessed by delusions?

Kisara, whose failing kidneys meant she could no longer fight for long periods of time, recently gave up fighting on the front lines and shut Yukikage in a locker in the office. What did it mean that she was wielding it in the dojo again? Like Rentaro, who was using the recent terrorist incident as a chance to clear up the facts of his parents’ deaths, was there some sort of change in Kisara’s state of mind, too, or was he overthinking it?

A line from the *Hojoki*, a famous classical text he had studied in Japanese class, came to mind: *“Although the river flows unceasing, the water will never be the same as before.”*

As Rentaro was just about to open his mouth, he heard loud footsteps, and the door of the dojo was opened violently. Enju bounded in, looking just like a rabbit

with her hair in swaying pigtails. “Rentaro! Today is the day you promised to assist me with my training!”

Had he promised to do something like that?

Rentaro released the slide lock of the toy gun and loaded the first round while keeping an eye on Enju ten meters ahead. “If you think you’re in trouble make sure to yell. Understand?”

Enju shouted, “I understand!” and waved her hand at him.

Rentaro and Kisara circled the back of the dojo by the lawn.

Rentaro took a deep breath. The tip of the gun Rentaro held was painted red in order to show that it was a toy gun that shot only BBs. Rentaro could feel Enju releasing her power as he took up his stance. “I-I’m starting.”

Rentaro aimed at Enju’s chest, then fired a bullet with a dry-sounding gunshot.

Huh? thought Rentaro as the bullet grazed Enju’s side.

He thought he missed his aim and tried again, aiming and shooting, but this time it was even more clear that Enju moved out of the way in an instant.

“Y-you little…” Rentaro fired consecutive shots, and Enju avoided them all safely.

In fact, she scowled, obviously bored. “Rentaro, this is boring.”

“Idiot, battle training isn’t supposed to be fun.” But, if she was going to go that far…

Rentaro abandoned the toy gun and drew his Springfield XD. It was loaded with nonlethal rubber rounds, but they were fired with gunpowder, so their speed was the same as real bullets, and it would do more than just hurt if Enju was hit with one. Even if Rentaro knew that she had powers of regeneration, he didn’t want to make her use them.

He fired the first shot. As he absorbed the recoil, he predicted where Enju would cross paths with it and fired continuous shots into her possible escape routes. He could tell that Enju had gotten serious by watching the afterimages left by her sharp eyes. Using the dojo’s outside wall to do a triangle jump, she approached Rentaro while staying one step ahead of the bullets.

Amazed, Rentaro continued firing as he stepped back. He was startled as Enju suddenly appeared in front of him. He tried to bring the gun's barrel back to bear on her, but her footwork was overwhelmingly faster.

"Take that!" she said.

Rentaro felt the pain of the skin of his hands rubbing off as Enju's kick came from below to send his gun flying.

"Match point!" Kisara, who had been watching the match with her arms folded, judged.

As Rentaro felt cold sweat running down his cheek, he slowly shifted his gaze to the side and saw Enju's foot pushing against the side of his neck. Enju lowered her foot slowly and peered at Rentaro happily with her arms behind her back.

"Well, I guess I should say I have high hopes for you," Rentaro said, making a sour face as he picked up his gun. At this rate, it was hard to say who was training whom.

During the last terrorist incident, he'd faced off against Kohina Hiruko, a dual-sword wielding Initiator, and was surprised at her speed, but fighting Enju like this, he could tell—the speed specialist Initiator, Enju Aihara, was even faster than Kohina. Enju could even be called the natural enemy of all gun users.

But this was not the only reason Enju was amazing. Initiators possessed enormous power, but in cases when they lost to ordinary people, it was because they'd seen swords or guns pointed at them in bloodlust and forgotten their reason for fighting. In other words, when the girls lost, it happened because their mental weakness as ten-year-old girls had been exploited.

However, Enju was not afraid of the muzzle of a gun. And that was an ability she had since before she met Rentaro. Enju was one of the Cursed Children, and someone who made the Stolen Generation, who ran the world ten years after the war, hate Gastrea even more.

It didn't bother her, but just imagining the situation she was in before they met where she had to face the muzzle of a gun made his heart hurt. He was sure he couldn't forgive a society like that.

Rentaro put the XD gun on the palm of his hand and took a long hard look at it.

It had been a long time since the general public was allowed to carry guns in the name of self-defense. However, in Rentaro's many brushes with death, he learned that a gun was an offensive weapon that existed to allow you to aim accurately at your opponent, to pull the trigger a fraction of a second faster. The idea of "self-defense" was an expedient one that nobody would touch.

This was the technologically advanced country of Japan, broke and scattering weapons in exchange for money and taxes. In reality, it was because of this that large global corporations like Shiba Heavy Weapons were created, but on the other hand, Japan had also become a hotbed of gun violence, so there were pluses and minuses.

Rentaro could say with certainty that he hated guns. However, if he didn't use one, he would not have been able to make up the difference between his abilities and those of his elder disciple Kisara, or strong Initiators like Enju.

Rentaro shook his head softly. There was the New Humanity Creation Project, where humans were operated on to turn them into mechanized human soldiers designed to obliterate the Gastrea. Rentaro hated that power as well. More specifically, he felt disgust for the large-caliber Super-Varanium alloy shells inserted into his right arm and left leg.

This was because bullets, whether they were used for both attacking or defending, killed people in the process. It would be better if things like that were erased from this world. Definitely. Definitely.

Just then, something pulled on his sleeve. When he turned around, Enju was beaming, pointing at herself enthusiastically. "Rentaro, how did you find my fighting?"

Rentaro closed his eyes and exhaled deeply through his nose. "You know, Enju, you shouldn't do a bunch of high kicks in a row in a skirt."

Enju blinked in surprise for a moment before holding down her skirt, embarrassed, but then smiled happily and said, "You speak of such even though you were happy about it."

Breaking out in a cold sweat as he felt Kisara's spearlike gaze on his back, he put his hand on Enju's head and ruffled her hair. "Idiot," he said, as Enju half-closed her eyes in pleasure.

“Satomi.”

Turning around, he saw Kisara with her right sleeve rolled up, tapping her wrist where her watch was with her left forefinger. It was time.

“Uh…Enju, Kisara and I have to go to school now.”

Enju suddenly froze for a second but then recovered immediately. “Right. Well then, be zealous in your studies!” Saying that, she stuck out her chest proudly.

Rentaro watched her with a conflicted expression on his face. “Enju, I’ll try to find a place that will take you as soon as possible, okay?”

“Take your time. It’s fine.” Enju laughed, but she sounded a little troubled.

After they left the dojo and turned a few corners to walk out onto a large street, they continued along that same street. It was still relatively early in the morning, so there weren’t very many cars, and people only appeared sporadically.

As Rentaro walked next to Kisara down the street lined with fresh-smelling poplars, Kisara spoke, still looking ahead. “You still haven’t found a new elementary school for Enju yet?”

“No…,” Rentaro mumbled as he looked at the granite tiles at his feet. During the Kagetane Hiruko terrorist incident, Kagetane had exposed Enju as one of the Cursed Children, and Enju was unavoidably expelled from school.

Enju pretended she didn’t care, but it was supremely embarrassing as her guardian to have her pretend for his sake, so in order to bring back her smile somehow, he had gone around to a bunch of schools trying to find one that would take her.

Rentaro kicked a pebble on the street as hard as he could. Of course, he had not gotten very favorable reactions.

It wasn’t something he was proud of, but even though he hid the truth about Enju’s identity and filled out the transfer applications as if she were a normal child, it seemed that nothing escaped the information net the schools had among themselves, and it had been passed along that Enju was one of the Cursed Children. Once, he was shockingly told upon arrival, “I hate Red-Eyes, and

I think those who're on their side have the Gastrea virus in their brains, too."

Rentaro lifted his face and glared gloomily at the brightly shining sun. Enju got good grades, was really athletic, and could brighten a classroom with her presence. She was a student schools should have been trying to *convince* to attend. So why was it that—*Damn it.*

Suddenly, the tip of Rentaro's nose was pushed hard. Surprised, he looked next to him and saw Kisara with her hand on her hip, peering at him with an angry expression.

"Hey, Satomi, do you think this problem is yours to handle alone? It's *our* problem, you know. Enju is an employee of the Tendo Civil Security Agency, which means her problem is my problem as well. You know, I was thinking… What if we had her attend a school in the Outer District?"

"That open-air classroom in the ruins? The classes would be so easy, it's not even worth considering."

"Oh my, does that mean you want Enju to go to an academically challenging school?" Rentaro groaned as she hit a nerve. It was true that the most important priority should be whether Enju would be comfortable at the school or not. Even if she were able to completely blend into her surroundings, as long as she herself was conscious that she was deceiving others, she would not be able to feel completely at ease there. And Enju definitely wasn't thick-skinned or someone who could lie easily to others.

When Rentaro stopped, Kisara went a few steps ahead and then turned around.

"Well, I mean…," he started. "I'll consider your suggestion."

Kisara sighed with exasperation and shook her head softly. "Satomi, everything really revolves around Enju for you, doesn't it? Why don't you take a look in a mirror? Unlike before, your face looks superhappy now."

Rentaro hurriedly ran his hand over his face, but as he did, he saw Kisara gloating and realized that she was toying with him.

"Now, Satomi, no matter what we end up doing, there's something we have to do first. We have a job. We've gotten to the point where we get work even if I

don’t go around begging for it. Lady Luck is smiling on the Tendo Civil Security Agency now, too,” she laughed.

“What is it? I don’t wanna do anything annoying.”

Kisara looked at him with suggestive eyes, flipped her shiny black hair, and told him. “The job is an escort mission. The package is Lady Seitenshi. If you would believe it, Lady Seitenshi herself asked for you, Satomi.”

2

After school, Rentaro changed trains and headed to the First District of Tokyo Area. On his way, he absentmindedly looked out the window at the Monoliths as he wondered why she chose him.

About a month earlier, Rentaro had ruined a ceremony that was supposed to honor his achievements saving Tokyo Area and destroying a Stage Five Gastrea. She should have resented him. They definitely did not have the type of relationship where she would offer him a job.

Still not completely satisfied, Rentaro got off at the station in front of the Seitenshi’s palace. After a few minutes’ walking, the Seitenshi’s palace came into view. It looked like it was built in the neo-Gothic style of architecture. The whole thing seemed to consist of many organic curves, with the curved glass windows that could be seen through the stone pillars that looked like bones and the area in front of the entrance slanted like waves. No matter how many times he saw it, it was always a gorgeous Western-style building, but for Rentaro, who lacked aesthetic sense, it just looked like the poor taste of people with new money.

He gave a security guard his name and the purpose of his visit. After the security guard called inside and talked for a while, Rentaro was allowed to pass, sandwiched between more guards in front of and behind him.

There were folding chairs lined up in an orderly fashion, and in front of them were a spotlight and a tiered doll stand. That was probably where the spokesman always stood to smoothly answer questions from the press. In the past, Rentaro had had the opportunity to see similar events when he was at the

emperor's palace, so there was a strange familiarity when he came to a place like this.

Because of those thoughts, he was surprised when he realized it was the Seitenshi herself who came to the podium. Directly in front of her sat a few people scattered about. It looked like she was practicing some sort of speech. It seemed she had not yet noticed Rentaro.

The third-generation head of state of Tokyo Area was wearing the same pure white dress she always wore and had a strained expression on her face. As usual, she possessed such beauty that she was hard to approach. "Today is a day of good fortune, and I wish health and joy on those gathered here today. Now, there are only three points I wish to speak of today. Only three—"

Her eye contact, the placement of her breath, the tempo of her speech—everything was perfect. In front of Rentaro's eyes, there was a national ruler his age presenting a speech that would put adults to shame.

Rentaro was reluctant to interrupt and listened attentively, putting his hand on the back of a chair on the side. When he did, a leg on that chair gave a loud creak, and he was surprised as everyone turned to look at him.

The Seitenshi adjusted her seated posture and folded her hands elegantly in front of her dress, cracking a smile. "Good afternoon, Satomi. You're right on time."

Suddenly, the memory of almost grabbing the Seitenshi resurfaced in Rentaro's mind, and he looked down slightly, scratching the back of his head. "Um, sorry about before."

"I am not concerned about it."

Looking at the Seitenshi's faint smile, he grumbled in his heart that she didn't just look good but she also had good character. No wonder she was so popular with the citizens.

A woman who looked like a secretary pushed up sharp glasses as she approached him. "Who is this?"

"Kiyomi, this is your first time meeting him, isn't it? This is Rentaro Satomi from the Tendo Civil Security Agency, the hero of Tokyo Area who drove away a

Stage Five Gastrea.”

The woman called Kiyomi was taken aback. “Rentaro Satomi… You mean the former kids’ TV singer and stripper at a gay bar? That Rentaro Satomi?”

“Who’re you calling a stripper at a gay bar?! Who’s spreading these false rumors, anyway?!”

Because of the incomplete news blackout that had been imposed, strange rumors were being spread, primarily online. Having his personal information distorted was a big headache for Rentaro. Based on those rumors, Rentaro was a former shiitake mushroom cultivation engineer, a former fortune adviser, and a former animal therapist. Kids’ TV singer and gay bar stripper were new.

“Hey, if you don’t need me for anything, I’m going home.”

“I do need you for something.” The Seitenshi signaled with a look telling those around her to back off, stepped down from the platform, and approached him.

“Satomi, President Saitake, the Osaka Area representative, is informally visiting Tokyo Area the day after tomorrow.”

“What?!” Rentaro froze unconsciously as she said a name he recognized. *Sougen Saitake?*

“That’s right. I’m sure you already know this, but currently, Japan is split into five areas—Sapporo, Sendai, Osaka, Hakata, and Tokyo Areas—ruled by five heads of state. One of them, President Saitake, sent a message out of the blue the other day saying that he was going to visit Tokyo Area and that he wanted a conference with me.”

“Why…?” Osaka Area hadn’t contacted Tokyo Area at all these past few years. What could he possibly want after all this time?

“I do not know. However, I believe a large part of why he chose now is because of the absence of Kikunojo.”

“Now that you mention it, that old man is in China or Russia or something, right? They showed it on TV.”

The Seitenshi nodded silently. Saitake and Kikunojo had a long history of being political opponents since before the Great War, so to come while Kikunojo was

gone could be seen as cowardice or underhandedness.

“I see. Well, you said you wanted me as an escort, but what exactly did you want me to do?”

“I want you to sit next to me in the limousine when we travel, stand behind me during meetings, and be my bodyguard.”

“Does that mean you want me to stand in the old man’s place where he always stands and be his replacement?”

“To put it plainly, yes.”

Rentaro didn’t know what to think anymore. What in the world was the national head of state in front of him thinking? “Is this at your own discretion?”

“Yes.”

“When the old man comes back and finds out about this, he’s going to be furious, you know.”

“Why would he be?”

“Because…I followed Kisara Tendo.”

As if she understood with just that, the Seitenshi let out an “Ah.”

“I do not make plans based on concerns over the Tendo family feud.”

“But you know that it’s not as simple a matter as a family feud.”

She did not say anything.

“Anyway, don’t you already have proper guards around you?”

“I was just about to introduce you to them. Please, come in.”

When the Seitenshi raised her arm to summon them in, there was the stamping of soldier boots, and men without a thread out of place entered the press conference room and formed a line. These were the Seitenshi’s personal guards, who were always seen off to the side during TV broadcasts. Rentaro counted six of them.

They all wore white overcoats and uniform caps, with handguns at their waists. He didn’t want to say it, but more than guards, they looked exactly like the

treasonous military police from World War II. When they looked this similar, it was strange that there was no military sword at their waist.

“Satomi, this is the captain, Yasuwaki.”

A conspicuously tall and handsome man stepped forward, smiling with his right arm outstretched. “Pleased to meet you. I am Takuto Yasuwaki. My rank is second lieutenant, and I have the honor of being the captain of the guard. I have heard much about you. If anything happens while on duty, I am counting on you, Satomi.”

“I haven’t accepted the offer yet, you know. Besides, I didn’t come here to serve. I just came to hear an explanation of a job.” Even as he spoke, Rentaro was inwardly surprised. The man looked to be in his early thirties. He was very young to be the captain of the Seitenshi’s personal guard.

Rentaro stared at the proffered right hand for a while, and then raised his head to look at Yasuwaki. He had sharp eyes in a narrow, pointy face that looked nervous. Behind his ingratiating voice, those eyes stared at him coldly. Rentaro could feel them on his skin that had suddenly become as sensitive as radar. For some reason, contrary to Yasuwaki’s tone of voice, Rentaro was apparently not very welcome.

Seeming to sense the unrest in the air, the Seitenshi hurriedly intervened. “Satomi, isn’t it a little impolite of you to not return his handshake?”

Yasuwaki lightly took off his hat and smiled at her. “No, Lady Seitenshi. I am used to being treated this way by civsec officers. Even if he is a hero, he is still a mere high school student, so he must be a little nervous.” Yasuwaki did not seem particularly hurt as he withdrew his hand and gave a polite bow.

He knows how to handle himself, Rentaro thought. *Was it my fault?*

The Seitenshi looked back and forth from Rentaro to Yasuwaki. Then, with a strange uneasiness, she quickly moved on to discussing compensation.

Rentaro let that go in one ear and out the other as he put his hand on his chin and thought, setting his personal feelings aside for a moment. He felt bad doing this to Kisara, but it wasn’t really a job he felt like doing.

First of all, during the previous terrorist incident, he had gone through a lot of

trouble because the government had been hiding important information. The job this time seemed to be a personal request of the Seitenshi's, but it sounded like the selfish wish of a princess where he would definitely get the short end of the stick.

Another reason was that he simply did not think he was good enough. A job like this should be undertaken by a specialist unit of VIP guards. It was one thing if there was no money and the client wanted to keep costs down by hiring a civsec officer, but for the national ruler, this was unthinkable. Guarding a helpless girl like the Seitenshi would likely be a nerve-racking job. He didn't think anything would happen, but if something did, the responsibility would be too great.

"Well then, if you will accept the job, please fill out the necessary paperwork and contact us."

The female secretary from earlier finished the standard explanation and handed Rentaro the contract. Then, the Seitenshi concluded, saying, "I have another engagement," and left, taking her personal guards with her.

By the time Rentaro stretched out his arm asking, "Uh, hey, where's the exit —" everyone had already left the press conference room.

At a loss, Rentaro scratched the back of his head, stuffed both hands in his pockets, and wandered around the Seitenshi's palace. However, he stopped suddenly and scratched his head three minutes later when he realized he was lost. After passing a reception room decorated with gigantic stuffed deer and alligators and the like, then a locked meeting room, Rentaro found himself in a hallway he had never seen before with a red carpet, without knowing how he had gotten there.

As Rentaro walked around looking for a worker to ask for directions, he suddenly felt a shot of pain as his arm was wrenched behind his back. "Don't say a word," a stifled voice whispered in his ear, and he was pushed into a nearby men's restroom and thrown against the wall. Rentaro saw stars, and he thought his forehead had split open as he watched a bloodstain spread on the wall.

Bastard. Still trapped, Rentaro elbowed his captor behind him and tripped him. Getting free, he used his left hand to grab his opponent's head and banged

it into the wall in return.

“Son of a bitch.”

Rentaro felt someone else coming from behind to hit him and took the attack by putting up his right arm to block without looking. Then, he used a bit of aikido to twist and throw his opponent into the wall.

There was a gasp as air was pushed out of his attacker’s lungs.

“That’s enough.” There was the click of a gun cocking, and Rentaro stopped moving. Turning around slowly, he saw the six guards from before, including Yasuwaki. One was standing guard outside the restroom, two had been beaten by Rentaro, and two had drawn their sidearms and had them pointed at Rentaro.

And the last, Yasuwaki, had his arms clasped behind his back, looking down at Rentaro like a snake tormenting something weaker than it.

“What are you trying to do…bastard?” Rentaro said.

Yasuwaki walked briskly over to Rentaro, and just as Rentaro thought he had drawn a large knife from his hip, Yasuwaki thrust the side of Rentaro’s face into the wall of the restroom as hard as he could. Yasuwaki brought his mouth next to Rentaro’s ear and whispered in a stifled voice, “Rentaro Satomi, turn down this job. It is *my* job to stand behind Lady Seitenshi.”

“Huh?”

“You make me sick. Who cares if you’re the hero who defeated a Zodiac? You just happened to be the one by the abandoned railgun module, you whelp. If I had been there, *I* would have defeated the Zodiac.”

Rentaro didn’t say anything.

“Why you?” Yasuwaki continued. “Lord Tendo left Lady Seitenshi to me while he was gone. To *me*. Lord Tendo’s usual position by her side should be mine.”

“You’re always by her side protecting her, aren’t you?”

Yasuwaki gave a snort. “Idiot. It’s not the same as being with her in the car or during meetings. Besides, Rentaro Satomi”—Yasuwaki leaned over and grinned, licking his lips repulsively—“Lady Seitenshi has grown up beautifully and will be sixteen this year. Don’t you think it’s about time Tokyo Area’s ruler had a

successor, as well?”

“Oh, is that how it is? In the end, it’s always that, huh?”

Yasuwaki drew his gun from his hip and thrust it between Rentaro’s eyebrows. “Shut up. Now, I’ll have your answer.”

“I’m not gonna listen to you.”

Yasuwaki put away his handgun quickly and headed for the hallway with a jerk of his chin. “Crush the bones in his arms and legs.”

Were these guys serious? Held down by guards on his left and right sides, he was disgusted and flailed wildly until suddenly the hold on his right hand loosened. The next instant, before he could even think about it, his hand had reached out to the gun on his hip. He aimed slightly to the right of Yasuwaki’s astonished face and pulled the trigger.

The bullet flew straight and grazed Yasuwaki’s cheek, and then the explosive sound of small-arms fire in a small room thundered throughout the palace. Then, there was a brief moment of silence, and the smell of gunpowder smoke stung Rentaro’s nostrils.

“This guy…”

“I can’t believe you fired in the Seitenshi’s palace.” The guards were shocked.

Yasuwaki roared at the guards, who had started to look nervous. “Get yourselves together, idiots!”

Holding his cheek where the bullet had grazed him, Yasuwaki narrowed his eyes that were burning with hatred. “I’ll kill you…… I’ll kill you, you son of a bitch!” Spitting out his parting threat, he and the guards quickly retreated.

In their place, workers rushed in in great numbers. “Are you all right?” they asked Rentaro.

As Rentaro waved away the hands reached out to him in his confused state and stood up, he glared at the exit Yasuwaki and the others left from. Apparently, the Seitenshi’s personal guards were far from being honest or diligent.

Rentaro received simple treatment and was interrogated by the staff and

found innocent. By the time he was led out of the palace by the staff, he had decided to take the job.

When Rentaro left the palace, the sun was low, and the sky was dyed red. He stretched hard, and the bones in his body made delightful popping sounds. Every time he had to undergo this kind of questioning, it made his shoulders stiff.

Suddenly, he felt a sharp pain and pressed his hand to the bandage on his forehead.

On the other hand, despite the extremely serious matter of boldly shooting a gun in the Seitenshi's palace, he had been allowed to go home surprisingly easily. For some reason, the staff understood his situation, but when Rentaro tried to turn the conversation to Yasuwaki and the other guards, the staff gave a start and looked down.

It looked like the staff inside the palace had some knowledge of the arrogance of the Seitenshi's personal guards. At least, enough to figure out immediately that something had happened between Rentaro and the guards when they saw Yasuwaki and the others leave the restroom, with Rentaro inside with blood dripping from his forehead. Rentaro sighed. It had turned into something annoying.

Then, he looked up and thought, *Oh?* There was a bicycle circling the elaborately designed fountain in front of the Seitenshi's palace. It had been circling this whole time. Riding the bike was a girl about the same age as Enju with hair that could probably be called platinum blond. The wind blew her beautiful hair up, and it reflected the red light of the setting sun, sparkling brightly.

However, the girl was wearing baggy pajamas, her feet shod in house slippers, she had a serious case of bedhead sticking out from her head, her mouth hung half-open, and she pedaled the bike with a self-effacing expression on her face. It was hard to watch.

The people walking by had expressions on their faces that made it clear they did not want to get involved with what looked like a sleepwalker on a bike caught in an endless loop around the round fountain, and they quickened their steps to pass her.

Rentaro had a bad feeling about this and hunched his shoulders, walking quickly to pass the girl on the side, leaving plenty of space between them. With a feeling of relief, he stroked his chest and tried not to look back as he headed home.

Suddenly, there was the sound of something falling behind his back.

“Hey…! What the…?! Watch where you’re going!” The thunderous voice carried a hundred meters, and when Rentaro reluctantly turned back, there were three delinquent boys with bleached blond hair surrounding the girl from before. The girl had been thrown off her bike and looked like she didn’t know what had happened. Surprised, she looked left and right, but then the kicks started mercilessly, and Rentaro closed one eye.

The girl’s back crashed into the edge of the fountain, and the muffled voice that escaped when the air was knocked out of her lungs even reached Rentaro.

“Why aren’t you saying anything? Say something, bitch. You ran over my foot with this bike. Get it?”

“Aw man, that foot’s probably broken.”

“You’ve gotta pay compensation! Compensation!”

One of the boys started stomping on the vainly spinning spokes of the inverted bicycle in a fit of anger. The girl didn’t know what was going on and just stood with her mouth open. There were more people around them who avoided the girl and walked by, and some started appearing who didn’t want to get involved and turned away completely.

Rentaro felt bad for her, but he wasn’t such a good person that he would act like a hero and go in to help. His feeling of not wanting to get involved won, and he turned around, but when he suddenly thought of what Enju would say if she were here, his legs stopped as if they were glued to the ground.

Rentaro ruffled his fingers through his hair. *Damn it. Might as well call her parents*, he said to himself as he put his hand on the spiky-haired one who was poking the girl and who seemed to be the leader, forcing him to turn around to face Rentaro.

The spiky-haired boy scowled unpleasantly and said, “Huh?”

Rentaro regarded the boy with little in the way of enthusiasm. The pure violence of this type of scary-faced loudmouth was definitely easier to deal with than the underhanded, spiteful Yasuwaki.

When Rentaro didn't say anything, the boy said, "Who the hell are you?" and put his face close to Rentaro's to threaten him.

Rentaro didn't say anything and just tapped his own back twice where his gun was stuck into his belt.

The spiky-haired boy's reptilian eyes gave off a dangerous light, and there was an oppressive silence. The fibers of Rentaro's clothes poked his skin.

He didn't know how much time had passed, but the spiky-haired boy finally turned on his heel and said, "Hey, let's go," and left, taking his friends with him.

Exhaling softly and relaxing his shoulders, he swore to himself that he would never do this again. As Rentaro turned back reproachfully, he saw the blond girl looking at him with her mouth open.

"A hero… It's my first time ever seeing one." The girl in pajamas that he saved looked at him with an absentminded expression.

"You don't have to thank me. Just hurry up and go home! Later."

As he waved carelessly and was about leave, the girl grabbed the sleeve of his uniform. "Where are we?"

Rentaro covered his face with his palm and shook his head softly. Damn it, he had gotten involved, after all.

Sitting the girl on a bench in a green park in the neighborhood, Rentaro went all the way to a water faucet, got a towel wet, and brought it back. Wringing out the towel, he wiped the girl's face. "Stay still for a sec."

The girl lifted her chin, narrowed her eyes, and stayed there. "You seem to be… used to this."

"I've got a freeloader about your age at home, that's why. There, all clean." Rentaro took a step back to look at the girl, putting his hand on his hip and nodding once.

The girl lowered her head to bow in thanks—but strangely, she never lifted her

face back up. Rentaro thought this was suspicious and peeked at her face from below. Her eyelids looked heavy, blinking sleepily as she started falling asleep.

“Hey…”

Suddenly raising her head, the girl dug around in her pocket and pulled out a bottle with an English label on it, took a pill out of it, and put it in her mouth. Rentaro thought she was eating something and stole a look at the label on the bottle and frowned. Apparently, they were caffeine pills.

“I’m…nocturnal, so if I don’t do this, I can’t stay awake during the day.” As she spoke, she tossed a large number of pills in her mouth one after another, chewed sleepily, and swallowed. Rentaro did not know much about this type of pill, but he could tell that this was more than a normal dose.

“Where did you come from? What’s your name? Where’s your guardian? Why are you wearing pajamas and house slippers?”

The girl looked down at her own clothes and tilted her head slowly. “Dunno…” It had taken her about ten seconds to react.

“What do you mean, ‘dunno’? Jeez… What about your name, then?”

“My name is…” For some reason, the girl’s eyes shifted for a moment, but then she seemed to give up and lifted her face. “Tina…… It’s Tina Sprout.”

“I’m Rentaro Satomi.”

“Call me Tina.”

“Then, you can call me Rentaro.”

“Rentaro…?” Tina looked at Rentaro absentmindedly with her mouth half-open.

“What is it?”

“I just…wanted to try it out.”

Rentaro slumped his shoulders. This was tiring. “Well, Tina, I’ll ask you again. Where’s your guardian?”

“I don’t have one.”

She didn’t? “Where did you come from? You can just tell me what you

remember.”

With her eyes half-closed, Tina tilted her head front and back, left and right, stuck her forefinger on her chin, and started to speak slowly. “All I remember is that I think I woke up in my apartment today, took a shower, changed my clothes, and went out.”

“Don’t lie! Not only haven’t you changed or showered, you look like you just woke up!”

Tina opened her mouth and said, “Oh,” softly, her eyes still half-closed. “You know me better than…I know myself…don’t you?”

“Hey… The bike that was broken was yours, right?”

“Bike? Was I…riding something…like that?”

“Never mind. You should go to the police box and ask for directions.”

“I can’t…really…”

“Just do it. I realized now that I can’t deal with you.”

“Don’t…say that.”

Rentaro wrote his phone number on a piece of paper and handed it to her. “Here, if you get lost again, you can call me, so just go to the police box. Please.”

“Then, can I try calling you as a test right now?”

“Why do you have to do something like that…?”

“Because you might have given me a fake phone number.”

Rentaro had no words.

Tina turned her back on him and fiddled with her cell phone, and then Rentaro’s chest pocket started to vibrate. “I know this is sudden, but you are interested in ten-year-old girls, right?”

“Wh…what…?”

“I was keenly aware of you gazing at the skin peeking out from my pajamas.”

“Go see an eye doctor.”

“I was afraid to say it to you in person, but you really have an unfortunate face, don’t you, Rentaro?”

“Shut up.”

“I also didn’t get a chance to say this, but I know where my apartment is.”

Rentaro felt foolish. *Then, what was I hanging out with this kid for?*

Tina smiled faintly and folded her cell phone shut slowly. “Today was a very fun day.”

Apparently, in this girl’s mind, this farce was saved in her memory as a fun day.

It wasn’t fun at all for me, you know, he almost said, but kept it to himself after seeing her happy face.

Tina slowly slid off the bench and smiled. “I hope we can meet again.”

Rentaro scratched his head, then gave up and gave a big nod, shooing her off with his hand.

“Well then, good-bye, Rentaro.” The girl bowed politely and walked falteringly out of the park. Rentaro watched her go, not exhaling with relief until he couldn’t see her anymore. She didn’t seem like a bad kid.

Thinking he had another story he could tell Enju, he walked in the opposite direction of the girl.

3

Cars were passing by so quickly they made Tina’s ears hurt before going off into the distance. The temperature had cooled down, and it had gotten a little chilly. As Tina trudged down the highway, before she knew it, she had turned her face toward the cars with their headlights turned on.

The sky was dyed with darkness and the moon shone in stark contrast. *Night is coming. It’s my time.* One by one, the cells in her body started to awaken, her mind became clear, and her body became filled with energy.

Just then, Tina’s cell phone vibrated. Looking at the caller’s name, she put the phone to her ear. “Master?”

“Give your report.” It was a hard, businesslike voice.

“I have infiltrated Tokyo Area successfully. I will now return to my apartment and then head to the designated location to retrieve the items.”

“Anything out of the ordinary to report?”

“There was some trouble, but it was nothing serious.” Tina put her hand on her chest and closed her eyes as she continued slowly. “……a kind person helped me.”

The person on the other end of the phone spoke, sounding irritated. “I thought I told you to avoid contact with other people if possible. In order to avoid information leaks, make sure you give a false name if possible.”

“Yes, sir…… No problem.”

“Tina Sprout. What is your mission? Let me hear it again.”

Tina lifted her face and looked at the moon. She was completely awake now. “Do not worry, Master. I will carry out the assassination of the Seitenshi.”

Tina’s feet took her back to her apartment. The wooden apartment building was old, built based on old building standards with pillars that had been rebuilt time and time again in order to extend its life. The white paint was peeling, and there were cracks in the wall. Tina’s master probably thought this would make the best hideout for her because there were no conspicuous buildings around, and it was a quiet area.

Still, what was up with still using a pinfire gun in the year 2031? she wondered, remembering her classes on espionage as she put her key in the lock and turned.

The minute she opened the door, she was met with stagnant, moldy air. Just like the outside, the inside did not consider the comforts of its renter, but this was a temporary mission, so she just had to bear with it while she was here. Thinking that, she took off her slippers.

Tina blushed as she stood in front of the full-length mirror left behind by the previous occupant. *I stood in front of that man dressed like this? If I dressed up a little, I would look cuter than this*, she thought regretfully as she took off her pajamas and went to take a shower.

Changing her clothes, she replaced the battery pack of her cell phone with one that was fully charged and put a futuristic-looking spindle-shape wireless headset over her right ear. Then, she called her master back as she left the apartment.

She headed toward a seedy place where freight containers from the suburbs

were stacked neatly together. They were a kind of rental boxes called trunk rooms. After the Great War, apparently, there were a number of people who started a business by simply installing freight containers on vacant land. Because of Tokyo Area's chronic land shortage and with the price of land going up gradually, it was a practice that continued steadily until the land was sold off and the owners withdrew.

"Master, I have arrived." Tina held an IC card up to the unmanned gate and went inside, looking for the container he was talking about. Before long, she found the number she was looking for on a conspicuously large container. Inserting the key in the lock, she entered the numbers into the padlock as she was told and opened the door.

When she stepped inside, Tina was shocked.

"What do you think, Tina?" She could hear the pride in his voice over the phone.

The interior of the gigantic container, about the size of six tatami mats, could be called an armory. Of course, there were small arms and sniper rifles, but there were also rocket launchers, recoilless guns, antitank rifles, and other superior weapons overflowing from the walls and ceilings. It seemed like he had gotten one of everything that looked like it could be of use, just to be certain not to be lacking something.

Getting a peek at his neurotic eccentricity, Tina chose an antitank sniper rifle and put it in her gun case. However, as she tried to lift it up, it wouldn't budge off the ground even when she used all the strength she had as a weak girl.

Left with no choice, she calmed her breathing and released her power. She could feel her whole body gradually growing warm and felt her five senses physically expanding. She didn't have a mirror, so she couldn't see for herself, but she was sure her eyes were red.

This time, she was able to lift the case easily, and she passed through the gate with her head down so her eyes wouldn't be seen and walked quickly toward her apartment. All that was left was to get back home. Perhaps because of that self-conceit, she froze when high beams from a car suddenly shone on her from the side.

“Miss, where are you from? You shouldn’t be out right now. Do you know what time it is? Where do you live?” A door slammed, and someone came out of the car.

Promptly covering just her face with the palm of her hand and seeing the sirens on top of the car, Tina reported the situation very calmly. “Master, I’m sorry. There has been an unforeseen situation. I have been stopped by the police.”

Apparently, they thought she was a runaway.

“Have they seen your face?”

“No…”

“Oh, well…” The man seemed to nod on the other end, and then gave her the order coldly and evenly. “Kill them.”

4

“This is terrible…” Holding the spoils of the evening limited-time sale war in their reusable bags, Rentaro’s and Enju’s feet stopped. The police car sunk into the concrete wall was in a sorry state —it looked like it had been kicked by Godzilla.

The sirens were smashed, the hood was crushed, and the exhaust pipe was bent in a strange direction. Outside the cordoned-off area, a large number of onlookers were crowded around, taking pictures with their phones with one hand.

Rentaro approached one of them hesitatingly and said, “Hey, do you know what in the world happened here…?”

“Who knows? It looks like they haven’t caught the perpetrator yet. But aren’t the only ones who can do something like this the Red-Eyes?”

Rentaro ground his teeth in frustration at not being able to refute this presumptive reasoning. It was true that even though it wasn’t strictly speaking *impossible* for a human to do this, the probability that it was a human was low

enough to ignore.

“There are no leads, and the officer attacked is still unconscious in critical condition.”

“Critical condition? He’s not dead?”

“Hmm? Yeah, what about it?”

“Nothing…” Rentaro felt bad saying it, but because the car had been so thoroughly destroyed, he had thought that the officer driving it would have left this world, as well. Rentaro gave a quick bow in thanks and returned to Enju.

Enju had covered her eyes, still holding her shopping bag. Rentaro stopped for a second and approached her slowly. “Enju,” he said quietly, “you’re not the one who did it. It was one of the other Children.”

Enju gave him a quick, bitter smile but then soon showed him a full smile. “Rentaro, you are too kind. Yes, I am fine now.”

“All right, let’s go home, then.” On the way home, he and Enju had a rambling conversation as she swung her shopping bags back and forth.

“And then, you know the new cartoon *Go, Zengar!* that just started…?”

As Rentaro snuck a peek at the side of Enju’s face, he wondered if he should say it. Should he just mind his own business?

Rentaro said diffidently, “Enju, don’t worry about it. You weren’t the one who did it.”

Enju tilted her head and looked at him like she didn’t know what he was talking about. “Hmm? Whatever is the matter, Rentaro?”

“You weren’t the one who did it.”

Enju’s gaze wavered, and she seemed flustered. “Wh-what’s the matter, Rentaro? You seem strange.”

Rentaro put his hands on Enju’s shoulders and turned her toward him, saying each word clearly and distinctly. “I said, you weren’t the one who did that, Enju…”

Enju made a perplexed face, but then unconsciously, her face crumpled and

her expression wavered. Enju looked down and wiped her eyes quickly with her sleeve. “R-Rentaro, you’re amazing! How did you know that I was still concerned about that? Even though Kisara and Sumire wouldn’t have realized…”

Rentaro put his hand on her head and let out a long breath. “Because it’s you…”

“Why can’t everyone just get along, Rentaro…?” Enju’s voice was hoarse, and it sounded like it would disappear at any moment.

“I don’t know……” Even as Rentaro tousled Enju’s hair, he saw a bleak future for the Cursed Children. Born at almost the same time as the Great Gastrea War ten years ago, the Cursed Children were ten years old or younger. As such, it was probably too much to ask for them to possess wise judgment.

However, each time a crime like this was committed, the hatred the Stolen Generation—who already hated Gastrea—had for the Cursed Children grew stronger. The girls didn’t know. They didn’t realize that hatred would swing in the opposite direction of where force was applied, like a pendulum. Sometimes with far more force.

Each time one of the Cursed Children committed a crime, it was as if Enju’s neck was being strangled slowly with a silk rope, and it made Rentaro’s chest hurt to watch it. No, more accurately, it was as if the net trapping the Children was getting tighter, in a way they couldn’t see.

Rentaro narrowed his eyes and looked back once more at the scene behind them. He didn’t know who’d done it, but Rentaro doubted he could forgive the perpetrator.

Enju finally separated herself slowly from Rentaro and wiped her face one more time with her sleeve. “All right, this time—this time—I am surely fine!”

Rentaro smiled. “Yeah… Okay.” In order to dispel the solemn atmosphere, Rentaro exhaled deeply, puffing out his chest and laughing loudly, looking down at the shopping bags. “By the way, Enju, we got a good haul at the limited-time sale today, huh?”

Enju grinned mischievously. “I did not think we would be able to purchase meat so cheaply, either.”

Rentaro pumped his fist. “We’re having sukiyaki today!”

“Sukiyaki…!” Enju hopped happily.

As soon as Rentaro got back to their rundown eight-tatami-mat apartment, he put on an apron and went to the kitchen. As he cut the vegetables into bite-size pieces, Enju capered around Rentaro, chattering excitedly about the cartoon she was currently into, *Go, Zengar!* It sounded like it was based on those old shows about fighting squadrons and transforming robots.

“And then, and then, there’s the robot of justice, Zenin Zengar, and the evil robot, Akuin Akkar. And the storyboards for episode eighteen were—”

“*Zenin zenga*, like ‘one good turn deserves another’? And *akuin akka*, like ‘what goes around comes around’? Aren’t those Buddhist terms or something? That’s a pretty advanced cartoon.”

Enju proudly put both hands on her hips, as if impressed that Rentaro had noticed. “That’s right. And the most amazing thing is that the squadron consists of four chief priests and a Buddhist nun, and they are all bald, and their five temples combine to form one large transforming robot.”

“R-really……”

The cartoons you watch are so weird, Rentaro thought as he put *konnyaku* noodles, leeks, chrysanthemum leaves, and mushrooms on a bamboo draining basket and then unfolded a low table that was leaning against the wall. Putting on oven mitts, Rentaro moved the sukiyaki pot from the kitchen to the gas burner on the table and turned it on. Before long, the ingredients were boiling gently, and the warm steam was rising to meet Rentaro’s and Enju’s faces. As the sweet smell of the sauce filled the room, Rentaro started salivating. He couldn’t wait to eat. It had been days since he’d had such extravagant food for dinner.

After Rentaro chided Enju for putting her hands on the low table and jumping around, she switched to hitting the bowl with the egg in it with her chopsticks and yelling, “Is it time to eat yet?”

Rentaro gave a wry smile. Urging Enju to sit down, they had just started to chorus, “Time to eat!” when the front door’s intercom rang unexpectedly.

Rentaro scowled as he turned to look at the clock on the wall. Who could it be at this time of night?

“S-Satomi dear…” With a voice that was on the verge of death, a beautiful girl wearing Japanese-style clothes barged in. She had a large face mask over her mouth, her face was red, and she sounded like she had a bad cough.

Rentaro was taken aback. He knew this face. And it was a face that he wanted to avoid seeing if possible. “M-Miori?! What are you doing here?”

The girl in the kimono took cold medicine and nutritional supplement drinks out of the shopping bag on her arm and put them in Rentaro’s hands. She seemed to be making an appeal to him as she pointed at herself repeatedly.

“T-take care of me…while I’m sick…” Saying just that seemed to use up all her energy, and she fell with a thud to the floor of the entryway.

Rentaro’s mouth gaped as he was overcome with surprise. But, that was not the end of the situation.

Seconds after the girl in the kimono fell, Kisara Tendo came through the entrance, her face haggard. “S-Satomi…… I know it’s sudden, but take this…” Then Kisara handed him a tray of beef with a half-price price tag on it.

It was cheaper than the sale meat Rentaro had bought. “Make sukiyaki with it… I’m…hungry…” Saying only that, Kisara fainted from hunger and fell with a thud to the floor of the entryway. The girl in the kimono was smushed and made a weird sound.

One sick person. One unconscious person. A total of two people had suddenly barged into the Satomi home.

Rentaro turned white as a sheet. “Th-this is terrible…”

Enju raised her voice, sounding unhappy. “Another woman I do not know is here! Rentaro, explain yourself! Who is this woman who is not Kisara?!”

“A-anyway, Enju, I’ll pretend I didn’t see anything, so please abandon one of them outside!”

Enju didn’t really understand what was going on and tilted her head in question. “Hmm? Rentaro, what are you saying?”

“Kisara and this girl don’t get along at all! Leaving them in the same space will cause an awful chemical reaction.”

Enju leaned over the girl in the kimono and started poking the girl with her chopsticks. “Well, who is she?”

Rentaro scratched the back of his head and remembered that Enju hadn’t actually been introduced to her yet. “This is Miori. Miori Shiba. The student council president of my school, Magata High School, and the daughter of the CEO of Shiba Heavy Weapons, the weapons corporation that supplies us with equipment.”

The phrase “bed of thorns” was meant for times like this, Rentaro thought as he broke out into a cold sweat. Across the table from Rentaro was an unhappy-looking Kisara, kneeling properly and poking at the sukiyaki pot. Diagonally across from him was Enju, grinning, and next to him in equally high spirits was Miori.

Miori’s face was still red, but after a dose of cold medicine and nutritional drinks, she had soon recovered enough to sit up. Now, she had even taken off her face mask that would get in the way of eating sukiyaki. In the end, it was doubtful whether she even really needed someone to look after her while she was sick. Rentaro looked sideways at Miori, wondering if it had just been an excuse to come to his house.

She seemed to be the perfect little rich girl, with her long, wavy, shiny black hair and her brightly colored Japanese-style clothes. As they were *both* rich girls with a certain noble air about them, she and Kisara were very similar, but there were definite differences in their Japanese versus Western tastes and in their ways of thinking.

“Sorry y’all ended up treating me, too, Satomi dear,” Miori said with a drawl.

“There’s nothing to be sorry about—”

“Yes, there is,” Kisara said flatly, with her eyes closed and just her chopsticks moving silently and continuously. “We brought ingredients like respectable people do, but that snake woman over there is eating for free. It’s a bother. I wish she would leave immediately.”

“Oh, were you here, Kisara? Your boobs were so large that I couldn’t see your face.”

There was a strange sound that Rentaro had never heard before as Kisara crushed the chopsticks in her hand.

Hey, those are my chopsticks!

“Sorry, Satomi, can I have another pair of chopsticks?” Kisara tilted her head with a sweet rich girl smile, but her hand was shaking.

Rentaro stuck out his hand fearfully, and Kisara deposited the chopstick shards into his palm. When he looked more closely, he could see that the chopsticks had been shattered into well over twenty pieces. He couldn’t even imagine how much strength was needed to crush them so thoroughly.

Rentaro, who had managed to defeat the highly ranked Kagetane Hiruko pair as well as repelling a Stage Five Gastrea, wanted to run away from this place this instant.

Kisara stared at Rentaro. “By the way, Satomi, what are you going to do about the job?”

“About that. If you’re okay with it, President, I’d like to accept.”

“All right, I’ll fill out the paperwork and send it along.”

Rentaro turned to face Enju again. “Enju, I’ll tell you more about it tomorrow, but we have an escort mission. I’m counting on you.”

Enju saluted sharply and said cheerfully, “All right, a job!”

Miori narrowed her eyes and looked at Enju mischievously. “Enju, I’ve heard a lot about you from dear Satomi. You’re such a cute little thing. Dear Satomi’s always complaining to me about how hard it is to hold in his feelings when he’s turned on by you.”

Enju’s pigtails bounced sharply in surprise. “Is that right, Rentaro?! It is not necessary to hold in your feelings!”

“It’s not true! Miori, stop making things up!”

Miori spread open a large fan and covered her mouth, snickering. At first

glance, it looked like a refined gesture, but her fan was an iron fan, reinforced with iron in a number of places and a fine weapon in its own right. “You know those combat shoes you wear, Enju? We designed them based on measurements from dear Satomi. How are they? Are they comfortable?”

“Oh, yes! So you made those? Yes, they are good shoes.”

“I see, I see. Come back and tell us when your feet grow and they get too tight. I’ll make some new ones for you. Also, Enju, those Varanium bullets dear Satomi scatters all over the place, and the equipment he uses—they’re all provided by our company, you know.”

Enju looked around at the shabby eight-tatami-mat room and tilted her head with a look of bewilderment. “But Satomi doesn’t have the money to pay for that.”

“It’s free.”

“Free?”

“I’ll explain about that,” Rentaro interrupted.

It might have seemed like civsec officers were the only ones who gained from sponsorship contracts with weapons companies that supplied them with equipment, but of course, that was not the case. For weapons companies, being known to supply equipment to strong civsec officer pairs whose names were brands in and of themselves could be used for marketing campaigns.

Once pairs rose to a certain rank, their private information stopped being published on the list managed by the country, but if they weren’t afraid of being kidnapped or assassinated by other countries and continued to show their faces in public, strong pairs could make a lot of money from advertisements and commercials. However, the weapons companies also did not just sponsor anyone off the street, of course, and there was a strict review process involved.

A year earlier, when the Tendo Civil Security Agency had just been founded and had no results to speak of yet, they applied knowing they had nothing to lose, but—

Miori was all smiles as she took Rentaro’s arm and suddenly blew into his ear. Rentaro’s body stiffened in surprise. “And then, Enju, the minute I saw dear

Satomi, I knew. *He will be someone great in the future*, I thought. That's why we accepted him, with some conditions."

"Conditions? What conditions?"

"There were a few. He had to test new products, appear in commercials, you know. One of them was that he had to study with me at Magata High School. I have it all in writing." She laughed. "Dear Satomi is all mine."

Rentaro thought going to school was a waste of time, but because of their contract, he was partially bound to the school and was being forced to attend. The worst was if they happened to bump into each other during the all-school assemblies, when Miori would be on stage as student council president and give him conspicuous winks or wave at him, which made the other boys at school hate him.

"Satomi, get away from that woman this instant." Kisara's eyes were steady.

"H-hey, idiot, get off of me, Miori. They're touching! They're touching!"

As Rentaro became flustered, Miori smiled teasingly, still hanging on to his arm. "What? What're touching? Could you be talking about my chest? I'm making them touch on purpose. Even so, you've got it tough, Satomi dear. Kisara has those large breasts hanging off her but seems unexpectedly prudish, and if you go after Enju, you'll end up in handcuffs, right? So…" With slightly flushed cheeks, Miori looked at Rentaro with upturned eyes. "Hey, Satomi dear. Am I cute?"

"H-huh?! You beat the second-place person at the beauty contest at the school festival by a wide margin. What are you asking about it now for—?"

"I want to hear it from your lips, Satomi dear."

He was perplexed by her strange tone of voice and her acting cute and scratched his head. "Well, y-yeah, you're cute."

"Say it again."

"I-I said, you're cute…"

"Did you hear that? Hey, Kisara, did you hear that? He called me cute twice! Oh my, what should I do?"

Kisara had her fists on her knees and was trembling all over.

“And you know, Satomi dear, we have our own private civil security agency at Shiba Heavy Weapons, so why don’t you quit Tendo Civil Security Agency and work for us?” Miori continued. “If you join now, I’ll throw in the right to do whatever you like to the most beautiful girl in school whenever you want.”

“Y-you can’t!” Kisara hurriedly leaned her body forward. “S-Satomi has a contract with the Tendo Civil Security Agency! Not with you guys.”

“He can just break that contract. We can pay you this much, Satomi dear.” Miori quickly flicked the abacus she pulled from the sleeve of her kimono and brought it coquettishly to Rentaro’s face.

When he saw the number, the chrysanthemum leaf he was eating almost came out of his nose. “What’s with that number? It’s a joke, right?”

“Satomi dear, you’ve risen to the rank of 1,000, haven’t you? That’s your market price, you know.”

“It is?”

Looking at Kisara, he saw her stuffing her mouth with meat and vegetables like a squirrel and turned her nose up, looking the other way. Apparently, she had activated the Kisara rule where she didn’t have to talk if there was something in her mouth.

As Enju blew on her meat to cool it, she looked at Miori. “Why don’t you and Kisara get along?” She should have just stopped, but instead, Enju waved handheld fireworks around a powder keg.

Miori laughed. “That’s a good question. Of course, there is a long history between the Shiba and Tendo families, but Kisara and I are way beyond that. We hate each other on a genetic level.”

“Small boobs.” Kisara mumbled this softly.

However, Miori was the better actor. She turned over her fan and waved it softly. “Japanese clothes look better on those with moderate chests. Large, vulgar breasts are unnecessary. Do you understand, Kisara?”

For some reason, Enju’s head bobbed up and down as she nodded.

There was a popping sound—the sound of Kisara's blood vessel ripping as she looked down.

Even though there was no more food on Kisara's plate, her chopsticks were still mechanically making the trip between her plate and her mouth. It was scary. "Hey, Yukikage…… What's that? You want to drink the blood of the snake woman? Well, if you say so…" She laughed evilly. Kisara was so angry that it caused a shift in her mental state, and she had begun talking to the sword at her side. "Satomi, this food tastes good, but I think there's something missing. And that is Miori's blood!"

Hey, come on…

Kisara finally started to stand unsteadily. "Miori, do you know what bloodletting is? Apparently, when sick people bleed a little bit, they feel better. I will……be happy to perform bloodletting on you."

Kisara drew her sword and aimed it at Miori's eyes.

"Everything from the neck up is unnecessary."

That's not called bloodletting. Rentaro wanted to just hold his head. He didn't want this to happen. That's why he didn't want to have the two of them in the same space. "C-calm down, Kisara."

"Calm down? Did you just tell me to calm down? My anger is ecstasy!" Even her language ability was uncertain now, and when Kisara started to breathe Lamaze style, Miori stood quietly with a smug look on her face.

Rentaro remembered the phrase "an ostrich in the desert." There was an anecdote about how an ostrich in the desert will stick its head in the sand and pretend it can't see anything when an enemy appears.

At a loss, Rentaro desperately stuffed meat into his mouth and tried to avert his eyes from reality. *Yeah, the meat is delicious. It's superdelicious.*

Kisara and Miori moved away from the table and faced each other, opening some distance between them.

Kisara spoke. "Miori. Someday, I will buy your company's stock twice over and short sell it, crushing the whole company! And then at the general stockholder

meeting, I'll disrupt the meeting as an extortionist and torment you until you cry!"

"I wouldn't if I were you. Shiba Heavy Weapons is listed on the Tokyo Stock Exchange as part of the Nikkei Tokyo 60, and is one of Japan's mainstay industries. It's suicidal to try to short sell it. Anyway, how much capital does the runaway daughter of the Tendo family have, anyway? If you start by buying, you can make a lot of money, you know."

"I would rather bite off my tongue and die than make money off your company's stocks!"

"Does that mean you won't back down?"

"I'll send you to the other world."

Miori reached into her kimono sleeve and pulled out a government sidearm, a Swordfish, custom-made just for her, and then took a complicated stance with her iron fan in one hand and handgun in the other. "I don't know about your Tendo style or whatever, but it's just an improvised martial art that's barely been around for a hundred years. I'll make you bow to the Shiba style."

Kisara took her sword-drawing stance and spoke in a cold voice. "Shut up, Miori. Save your sass for the hereafter."

In the midst of this volatile situation, Enju was the only one who balled her fist and said, "Be careful, Miori! If you touch Kisara, she'll suck up your boobs!" energetically cheering her on. It seemed like Enju was on Miori's side.

For some reason, the fluorescent lightbulb that had just been changed flickered.

"Shiba Style Niten Kitcho—"

"Tendo Sword Drawing, First Style, Number 2—"

Rentaro realized that he was never getting his cleaning deposit back and was suddenly very depressed.

After being rocked in the luxurious limousine for about two hours, they finally reached their destination. Rentaro got out of the limousine and looked up at the enormous building in front of him as he listened to the clear cry of a skylark in the bushes. The informal conference would be taking place at a high-rise hotel eighty-six stories tall. Rentaro had heard that along with each area's embassies, it was often used as a safe house for important persons.

Because countries around the world lost a lot of land to the Gastrea invasion after the Great Gastrea War, it had become necessary to build taller buildings in order to cram in the large numbers of people that remained. After the creation of real estate tax laws favorable to allowing buildings to stretch vertically, a number of high-rise buildings were built quickly as if in competition with one another. Tokyo Area was already dotted with buildings taller than the Tokyo Skytree.

“Rentaro, go and do your best on the job,” said Enju, waving at Rentaro from inside the limousine. Rentaro waved back and then followed behind the girl in white in front of him, the Seitenshi.

The Seitenshi’s white formalwear looked like a wedding dress and exposed a lot of her upper back. Rentaro could see her slender shoulders and a peek of her shoulder blades in addition to the light pink skin with its healthy blood circulation. Rentaro felt a little guilty and shifted his gaze, asking her curtly, “Did you have to leave Enju in the car? It would be safer if she was with us.”

“I cannot bring a child into a serious place like this.”

With no choice but to obey, Rentaro sighed inwardly.

The Seitenshi went through the rotating doors and informed the gorgeous front desk obviously meant for nobility of the reason for their visit. They were immediately received by the manager, who pressed a key courteously into the Seitenshi’s hand, deferential but stiff with nervousness. The Seitenshi gave a slight smile and thanked him, and the manager smiled a self-satisfied smile.

When they got on the elevator, the Seitenshi stuck the key into the keyhole and turned, and a button to the highest floor appeared that was not there before. He couldn’t get used to this feeling no matter how many times he rode these elevators—the feeling of being pushed down by slight pressure as the antique indicators counted the floors with a metallic clicking sound.

“Hey, do you really not know why Saitake wanted to have an informal conference?” Rentaro asked.

“Yes, I have no idea. That is to say”—the Seitenshi glanced at Rentaro for a moment—“I have never met President Saitake.”

Rentaro was surprised, but now that he thought about it, it made sense. After the Tokyo metropolitan area was renamed Tokyo Area and its forty-three wards, there had been a number of Seitenshis. The first Seitenshi, who rebuilt Tokyo after they lost the war and renamed Tokyo Area, died from sickness a little less than a year later, and the second Seitenshi took over. And now, the girl in front of him was the third Seitenshi, who had been a politician for only a year.

“Satomi, you are acquainted with President Saitake, are you not?”

“Yeah, well, when I was younger, right when I had been taken in by the Tendos, old man Kikunojo wanted to make me a politician and took me around to different parties. I guess you could say I’m acquainted with Saitake. It was a long time ago, though.”

“I actually have a question for you. What kind of person did President Saitake seem like to you? Whenever I asked Kikunojo about Saitake, he became obviously ill-humored…”

“Adolf Hitler.”

“Huh?” The Seitenshi’s voice cracked, and she blinked with surprise, making a funny face that Rentaro had never seen before. As the Seitenshi turned her whole body to face him, she rubbed the corners of her eyes lightly. “I’m sorry, Satomi, I’ve been so busy with state affairs lately that I seem to be tired… Will you say that once more, please?”

“I said, he’s like Adolf Hitler.”

“That’s a joke, isn’t it?”

“I’m serious. Even you know that Saitake has had seventeen assassination attempts by Osaka Area citizens, right? Anyone would be angry at having such heavy taxes levied, but that guy doesn’t care. Anyway, Lady Seitenshi, the heads of Sapporo Area, Sendai Area, and Hakata Area are like that, too. Those first-generation guys are the real deal, the ones who rebuilt their areas from the devastation of the Great Gastrea War.

“You know how people say the shogun’s council of elders got younger after Perry’s black ships arrived? During times of peace, it doesn’t matter who is in charge of Japan, but when things get really bad, the ones who crawl up are the really capable and dangerous guys. All the area rulers are guys who can say nonsense like ‘I am the representative of all of Japan’ with a straight face. Saitake is the worst of them. Be careful.”

“I-I understand. I appreciate the warning.” The Seitenshi looked a little overwhelmed and nodded gravely.

Partway through, Rentaro had started talking as if to convince himself, as well. He lifted his gaze to glare at the highest floor. Even if this was unofficial, the

other side wouldn't be so dumb as to set a trap in the conference location, but anyway, Rentaro was thinking of how he could successfully complete his job.

The Seitenshi looked nervously at Rentaro. "Please do not leave my side."

"Yes, ma'am," said Rentaro, a little insolently.

She looked put out, and stuck her index finger in his face. "Also, you have a short temper, so please keep yourself under control. If you hit Saitake and start a war between our areas, I won't be able to bear it. Also, you must not use impolite phrases like 'Shut up' or 'What the hell?'"

"Dang, I wouldn't say stuff like that."

The indicator finally stopped on the top floor, and the door opened gravely. Unexpectedly, the first thing they saw was the blue sky, and Rentaro's stomach sank. The reinforced hexagonal glass that formed the half dome above them was transparent, and looking out from there, the world seemed to spread out forever. Instead of feeling like they were in a room of the hotel, it seemed like a set of office furniture was placed in a private room of the observation deck on the top floor of a high-rise building.

Standing by the side of the elevator, bowing deeply once while standing erect were Saitake's guards. Brawny and muscular, it was obvious that they were extremely skilled. There was also a white-haired man with his back to them, sitting on a designer sofa and looking down at a six-page flexible paper display.

Rentaro knew who it was just by seeing his back. After a while, the man stood from the sofa and turned around. "A pleasure, Lady Seitenshi." He seemed to notice Rentaro then, and the tone of his voice dropped suddenly. "And is that the boy taken in by the Tendo family?"

"You're still alive? You should just die already, old man," said Rentaro.

"Watch your mouth, civsec officer! You know where we are!" His voice roared like thunder, and next to Rentaro, the Seitenshi trembled in surprise.

The man looked majestic, with his mustache curled at an acute angle, and his beard and hair connecting to look like a lion's mane. His eyes were sharp, and his tall height was clothed in a suit. He was supposed to be sixty-five this year, but he always seemed to be overflowing with energy, not seeming his age at all. He

was Kikunojo Tendo's rival and a cunning politician who had buried one political rival after another: Sougen Saitake.

"Rentaro, I have heard rumors about you. Tempted by that Tendo vixen and running away… You acted foolishly. Now, you are not a Tendo politician, you are a civsec officer at the same level as a worm crawling in dirt. I will treat you as such, and you shouldn't forget how low you are!"

Rentaro stuck his hands in his pockets and approached Saitake with dangerous eyes. "What the hell are you talking about, old man? Social status? Pedigree? If you can't be satisfied in a conversation without those things to lift you up, then you should go back to Osaka Area and stay there! Whether or not I'm a Tendo, I'm me." Rentaro closed in on Saitake until they were almost nose to nose and glared at him.

Unexpectedly, the one who relaxed his mouth and stepped back first was Saitake. Apparently, Rentaro had passed for now.

Looking at the Seitenshi, Rentaro saw that she had paled at the threats and stood holding her lace gloves.

Rentaro wanted to hide his face. *Come on, Lady Seitenshi. Stuff like this is just a warm-up.*

Saitake jerked his chin. "Is that Buddha sculptor doing well, Rentaro?"

Buddha sculptor surely referred to Kikunojo Tendo. Sougen Saitake's rival, Kikunojo Tendo, separate from his role as a politician, had an unexpected side as a Buddhist sculptor, carving images of the Buddha from wood. Kikunojo, who had been made into the youngest living national treasure of Japan at age sixty-two, was required to raise a disciple after receiving the title.

When Rentaro's thoughts reached that point, they dredged up bad memories, and he shook his head to get rid of them. "He hasn't been carving much lately, ever since his incompetent disciple ran away."

"What, do you regret what you did?"

Rentaro glared at Saitake, who was looking at Rentaro with unconcealed scorn. "Do you wanna fight, pal? You'll look smarter if you keep your mouth shut a little, you know."

The Seitenshi blinked her eyes in surprise. “Satomi, you…were Kikunojo’s disciple…?”

Apparently it was the first she had heard of it. “So what if I was?”

Rentaro said it so distastefully that the Seitenshi hurriedly covered her face and said, “It’s nothing…”

Saitake offered her a seat, and the Seitenshi sat down on the sofa on the other side of the glass table, and Rentaro stood behind her. Rentaro thought for sure that they would start political discussions now, but Saitake raised his gaze to look at Rentaro. “Rentaro, when you defeated the Stage Five Gastrea, you used the railgun module, destroying it beyond repair in the process, didn’t you? Do you understand how important that was?”

“Huh?” said Rentaro.

“In war, according to Sun Tzu’s *Art of War*, whoever is in a position of higher ground wins. The army who shoots arrows from the top of a hill wins, the army who drops bombs on an enemy from above wins, the army who figures out the enemy’s position using a satellite wins—so then, what’s next? That railgun you destroyed was a next-generation weapon that was supposed to be transferred to the moon to shoot down Gastrea on the ground from the surface of the moon. And you…”

Rentaro frowned. “Wait a minute, old man. Even if you could get the railgun onto the moon, would you really just use it for Gastrea?”

Saitake scoffed with contempt. “Of course not, idiot. It’s just as you’re imagining. It’s a next-generation deterrent as part of the groundwork to push Japan into becoming a great world power.”

“Do you plan to threaten other countries with violence?” The Seitenshi couldn’t bear it any longer and interrupted.

However, Saitake just laughed slowly and stood up, spreading his arms wide in an exaggerated gesture. “Lady Seitenshi, you have no vision. We must be thinking of the world after we exterminate all the Gastrea. Japan should reign as one of the world superpowers. I’m sure you have noticed as well. Ten years ago, right before the major powers of the world stopped functioning, many things

were taken away and destroyed by the Gastrea. And now, ten years later, whichever country recovers from this unprecedented disaster first will have the right to be the leader of future generations. And Japan should aim for that. This is my grand strategic design! If I must, I will eliminate every obstacle, every incompetent, and everyone who will not do as I say!”

Rentaro was at a loss for words. This could be taken as an implicit declaration of war against the heads of state of all the areas besides his own. There were many other heads of state who secretly plotted to get the drop on the other areas, but this man was probably the only one who would say it out loud.

Rentaro was stunned. He didn’t know where he should start in pointing out this man’s mistakes. The world’s mathematicians and statisticians had calculated a devastating number for the likelihood that mankind would be able to exterminate all the Gastrea, and yet Saitake wanted to kill more people this late in the game.

If Sumire Muroto were here, she would have said with a triumphant look on her face, “Humans are foolish creatures who, when they get tired of peace, turn to war, and when they tire of war, they want peace.”

Saitake suddenly stamped his feet in anger. “And *you*—you turned the railgun into scrap iron by making it take too heavy a load. You deserve to die a thousand deaths.”

“Well, sorry. You should be glad I tested it for you. Besides, the wreckage is still there in the Unexplored Territory, so you should go and retrieve it if you want it so bad.”

“Hmph. But, well, given my flair for leadership, I wouldn’t mind allowing you the opportunity to make up for it—”

“Huh?”

Saitake sat down on the couch and leaned forward. “I heard you defeated a pair that formerly had an IP Rank of 134. Rentaro, a vulnerable city like Tokyo Area will be destroyed eventually. If you do not want to be a citizen of a ruined country in five years, come with me. Let’s take over nations together, you and I. To watch the creation of a new world together with a wineglass in one hand—I’m sure it will be a sight to see.”

The Seitenshi paled and started to stand, but Rentaro stopped her with just an arm. “What the hell? Go back to your own area!”

Saitake’s eyes blazed with spite, and he waved his arms as he frothed at the mouth. “I won’t give up. I will gather all those with power and make them part of my plan! My will is Japan’s will! Japan’s will is my will!”

The Seitenshi quietly put her hands in the lap of her dress and sat up straight. “President Saitake, may we move on to the matter at hand?”

Saitake looked dumbfounded as he clucked his tongue and waved his hand saying, “Yeah, that’s fine.”

Two hours later, the first unofficial conference was over. The only thing to come of this conference was that the Seitenshi and Saitake both realized that they were incompatible, mortal enemies.

6

By the time they got in the limousine to go home, a thick curtain of darkness had fallen. Though Enju had spent a long time waiting in the car, she was now fast asleep on Rentaro’s lap, drooling and hanging off him. *Jeez, you’re a great guard*, he thought. Once the car reached the Seitenshi’s palace, the first day of their job would be successfully concluded. He knew he should be glad nothing major happened, but…

When he lifted his face, he saw the Seitenshi sitting prettily across from him with her hands folded neatly in her lap, looking out the window at the darkness outside with a slightly melancholy expression on her face.

“Don’t be so depressed,” Rentaro said.

The Seitenshi responded to Rentaro’s voice and slowly shifted her gaze. “I’m not depres—” Stopping midsentence, she quietly shook her head. “You’re right, I am a little… Generally speaking, I always believed that if I spoke sincerely, the person I was talking to would understand where I was coming from, no matter who it was, and I believe that even more now.”

“It’s not like it’s your fault, you know. Even Kikunojo would have trouble with someone like Saitake. You did a good job.”

The Seitenshi gave a mischievous smile as she place her hand on her chin. “You’re unexpectedly kind, Satomi. Even so, you surprised me today. From a budding politician to a Buddha sculptor to a soldier of the New Humanity Creation Project, it seems you’ve had a complicated past.”

Rentaro shifted his gaze with a start. “Hell, those are all parts of my past that I’d rather forget. Don’t make me think about them.”

“Will you carve something for me sometime?”

“No way.”

The Seitenshi put her hand to her mouth and chuckled. The atmosphere inside the car seemed to relax slightly. “But you’re amazing, Satomi. You didn’t back off one bit against Saitake. I think it’s that part of you that I like, Satomi.”

“Like?”

“Yes, everyone I come into contact with, from my tutors to Kikunojo, speaks to me with respect. There isn’t anyone around me who tells things to me straight like you do, Satomi. It’s very refreshing.”

Ah, now I get it, Rentaro thought. During the Kagetane Hiruko terrorist incident, Rentaro had not said anything to make the Seitenshi like him; instead, he had snapped at her constantly. He kept wondering why the Seitenshi would nominate him for this job, but now it made sense. “But why a civsec officer? You have your own personal guards, don’t you? You know, like that guy that looks like a military police officer?”

“Yasuwaki? He… He’s too dazzling. It’s a little scary to be with him.”

Even as Rentaro responded with an indifferent grunt, inwardly he thought it served Yasuwaki right. Yasuwaki seemed to be trying to shrewdly attract the Seitenshi’s attention, but it looked like his ulterior motive wasn’t gaining much traction.

The Seitenshi took out some peach juice from the mini fridge and poured it into a glass. She offered some to Rentaro, as well, so he took it. He was only

planning on taking a sip, but when he swallowed, the cold sweetness penetrated his internal organs, and he downed the glass in the blink of an eye. Apparently, he was thirstier than he thought.

When the Seitenshi lifted her face from her cup, for some reason, her eyes looked like they were clouded with the resolve to drink poisoned sake. She looked at Rentaro. “Satomi, it is rumored that President Saitake has been fostering relations with foreign countries.”

The car approached a curb, and Rentaro’s body swayed a little to the right. On his lap, Enju murmured something in her sleep. The city lights shone on the glistening metal car top, slipping away as they drove past.

“Keep going…,” he said.

“I’ve heard that America and other foreign countries have been secretly contacting Saitake, providing him with capital and weapons.”

“What’s the benefit for the foreign countries?”

“Varanium.” The Seitenshi stopped talking for a moment and lifted her face. “Varanium is the material used for the weapons and ammunition of civsec officers and the Monoliths that separate humans from Gastrea. All these are essential in the fight against the Gastrea. A small country without that much land like Japan is still okay, but large countries like Russia and America need a large amount of Varanium to take back the land stolen by the Gastrea. And rough estimates of the amount of Varanium left in the ground indicate that even if we scraped together all the Varanium in the world, it would not be enough to take back all the world’s continents from the Gastrea. Do you understand what that means?”

Rentaro understood what she meant so well it was almost painful. Different natural resources around the world were distributed unevenly. The Middle East was rich in oil, and South Africa was plentiful in gold and diamonds. Varanium was found on volcanic islands. Even if the islands were separate, it could still be said that the bulk was found on Japan.

Rentaro had recently met a boy who ran away from working in the mines, and he had been shocked at their terrible working conditions. Illegal mining of Varanium in the Unexplored Territory might seem like a failure at first when

looking at the risk and return, but taking into account that there was a constant stream of illegal miners, as long as one bore in mind the risk of being crushed by a whole mine, it was still possible to find some reasonable profit in it.

Rentaro's thoughts came one after another. Now that he thought about it, the bulk of the conference seemed to involve Saitake thrusting unfavorable conditions on Tokyo Area and the Seitenshi refusing them. Because of what she had just said, it seemed like Saitake was looking for an excuse to start a war.

"Then, what Saitake wants to do so badly that he would get help from foreign countries is…" Rentaro's voice trailed off.

"Yes. He probably wants to unite the military power of Tokyo, Sapporo, Sendai, and Hakata Areas. In return, he would provide them with a stable supply of Varanium."

"Is Saitake being controlled by the larger countries?"

"I do not know."

Rentaro put his hand on his chin. "I don't think he is someone who would just do what he's told."

"I do not think so, either. The foreign countries probably think they have tamed Saitake, and Saitake is probably planning on forestalling them." The Seitenshi straightened and continued with a clear voice. "In the ten years that have passed since the end of the war, each country has been holed up inside Monoliths in order to just recover their national power. However, it is now the time to look outward and take back the land that was lost. Whoever recovers their national power first will be the world leader of future generations. That part of Saitake's thinking is not incorrect. In other words, whoever controls Varanium will control the world.

"Satomi, from now on, countries around the world will contact the different areas of Japan either cooperatively or with hostility in search of Varanium. And the next generation of wars will not be flashy with ballistic missiles or bombers, but will be focused on assassinations carried out by civsec officers with high IP ranks who are strong enough to rock the world's military balance.

"In no time, all the strongest civsec officers will come to Japan, the country

bound by the curse of natural resources. Satomi, in the previous terrorist incident, you defeated Kagetane and Kohina Hiruko and drove away a Zodiac. Unfortunately, Tokyo Area cannot afford to allow one of its capable human resources to play around right now. I will have to ask you to work continuously from now on. For me, and for our country."

Rentaro stamped his foot with irritation that he could barely hold back. "You just decided that yourself. You really will decide everything based on whatever's convenient for you, won't you?"

"I recognize that." Then, the Seitenshi put both hands on her lower abdomen with a sorrowful expression. "I may also collapse in the whirlpool of turmoil. Because I can now have children, those around me keep telling me I should hurry up and bear a successor. However, instead of bearing a child with the best genes using mechanical means, I would rather bear a child through love, even if it is prideful."

Rentaro started to stand up without thinking. "Fight back! Why do you only think about death? If you know that Saitake is that dangerous, then there are a lot of ways you could oppose him, aren't there?"

The Seitenshi's face twisted with an expression more sorrowful than Rentaro had ever seen. "Even you're saying the same things as Kikunojo?"

"What?" "Satomi, you said that your perspective was narrow. I plan on taking back the land of Tokyo Area and one day connecting it back to Sendai and Osaka Areas. One day, when all the areas are connected again, the citizens will remember, won't they? That ten years ago, Japan was one country, and we were fellow citizens all looking up at the same sky. And then, they will be embarrassed to have ever been trapped in the cramped boxes of Tokyo or Osaka Areas.

"I do not have any intention of invading, and even if assassination or murder attempts occur, I have no intention of yielding. Revenge and the like is also absurd. Such cowardly acts are like trying to wash blood away with blood.

"Satomi, do you know who the first victims of a war are? They are the infants who barely open their eyes, and the elderly. During the period of confusion after the war, I went to visit the different parts of Tokyo Area with my mother and was shocked.

“In an environment with terrible hygiene, there were children who were sick and couldn’t even move, but when I smiled at them, they did their best to smile back at me. But the next day, they became cold and flies swarmed over them.” The Seitenshi shook her head firmly. “I do not want to see anything that terrible ever again. I must be the embodiment of peace. Not with words, but with actions.”

The Seitenshi folded her hands together and wrung them in a position of prayer. “Satomi, I cannot bear to have more seeds of sadness sown in this world…”

Rentaro felt a shiver up his spine.

I regard her with respect and affection. That’s why there are things I cannot forgive!

Rentaro was reminded of what the real mastermind behind the previous terrorist incident, Kikunojo Tendo, said about the Seitenshi. At the time, Rentaro didn’t understand Kikunojo’s actions of hatred toward the Cursed Children and his inability to hate the Seitenshi, but now Rentaro felt like maybe he *could* understand.

Rentaro shifted his gaze away from her. “You’re the idealistic type that dies young.”

“I do not want to become a person who cannot talk about her ideals.”

“Then you need to learn to outmaneuver others better.”

The Seitenshi was silent.

Rentaro lowered his gaze and rubbed the sleeping Enju’s back and shoulders. Finally, he lifted his face. “You’re stupid… But I don’t hate that.”

The Seitenshi blushed slightly. “Th-thank you very much.”

Just then, he felt a sudden sharp pain on his lower jaw. His head rang like he had just received an uppercut.

Enju, who up until now had not woken up from all manner of jostling and shaking, suddenly jumped up, her eyes wandering left and right. Apparently, he had gotten head-butted by the awakening girl. The pain brought tears to his

eyes.

“Wh-what was that for?” Rentaro looked at her as he rubbed his chin.

Enju crossed her arms and nodded as she looked back and forth. “My Rentaro Radar reacted to something just now…”

“R-Rentaro Radar…?”

“Yes, it reacts when Rentaro seems to be taking up with an unsavory type.” Enju seemed to have obtained a devilish new power. She looked back and forth, and when she finally settled her eyes on the Seitenshi, she stared at her silently.

“Wh-what is it?”

“You can’t have Rentaro.”

“U-um, I don’t know what you’re talking about…”

“Rentaro is from the planet of boobs, so he doesn’t recognize women with boobs smaller than Kisara’s. That’s why it’s impossible. You should give up now.”

The Seitenshi looked at Rentaro contemptuously. “Satomi… That’s filthy.”

“That’s a grossly false accusation.” Rentaro denied it with his whole body, looking at Enju resentfully. “Y-you little…”

However, Enju wasn’t looking at him anymore and was instead looking intently in front of them. “Rentaro, I have a bad feeling for some reason.”

The car was approaching a four-way intersection and stopped slowly at a red light. It had started sprinkling, and the view from the window was distorted by the water. Rentaro put his face next to Enju’s to look in the same direction as her.

Past the window Enju was pointing at, on a faraway building towering in the night, there was nothing out of the ordinary except for a few red aviation guidance lights on the edges of the building. At least, that was how it looked to Rentaro. However, Enju was an Initiator whose bodily functions, including her sensory organs, far surpassed those of ordinary humans.

Without knowing why, Rentaro also became nervous, and he prayed fervently that the car would start moving again soon. Finally, as if his prayers had been

heard, the light turned green and the car started to move. He breathed a sigh of relief.

However, Enju still had not relaxed. Looking at Enju's continued seriousness, he shifted his gaze once more. Near the roof of the building, for a split second, there was a glint of something. The instant he realized that it was a muzzle flash, Rentaro's spine froze, and before he could yell, he pushed Enju's head down and covered the Seitenshi with his body.

Then, they were attacked by a great calamity.

Surrounded by the sound of breaking glass and the squeal of the emergency brakes on the limousine, the Seitenshi started to scream. The car continued to slide sideways and crashed into a road sign. Rentaro was at his wits' end as he was thrown into the car door by the G's inside the car and almost lost his breath.

A sniper inside the city?

"Rentaro!" Enju screamed.

Rentaro swung to attention immediately and yelled, "Enju! Get out. Take the driver with you." Rentaro also kicked the door open and, taking the Seitenshi, who was in a state of shock, by the hand, he rolled out of the car.

Smack-dab in the middle of town, at an intersection. First, they needed to find shelter to hide under. Right after he thought he saw a flash of light on the roof of the building again, there was the echo of an explosion. The sniper bullet had shot out the fuel tank of the limousine, making it go up in flames, distorting the air around with its heat. Around them, members of the general public were screaming, their panic contagious, and the shock wave from the explosion made the Seitenshi fall forward.

When Rentaro went to help her up, the Seitenshi shook her head, her face stiff. "S-Satomi, I don't think I can walk…"

Rentaro ground his teeth and looked at the building.

This was bad.

There was a third flash of light. He stood in front to cover the Seitenshi but then looked regretful. It was no use. It would go through him and hit her. His

spine knew that it was going to be a direct hit, and he squeezed his eyes shut. “Ahhhhhhhhhhhh!”

Then, he heard Enju’s yell and the shrill sound of the attack. Enju rolled several times on the ground after she was thrown back.

At first, Rentaro didn’t know what had happened, but he soon realized after he saw Enju pulling the sniper’s bullet from her shoe. Amazing.

Rentaro didn’t know where Yasuwaki and the rest of the Seitenshi’s personal guard had been up until now, but the guards now came to form a wall around them as they withdrew. The retreating Seitenshi still seemed to be in a state of shock, and her face was pale as she trembled, gripping the sleeves of her dress.

Suddenly, there was a buzzing like the sound of an insect flapping its wings, and Rentaro looked around, but he saw nothing out of the ordinary.

What was that sound just now?

Enju pulled Rentaro’s arm hard and yelled. “Rentaro, what are you doing?! If you don’t hurry up and hide—”

“No, the enemy has already run away.” Rentaro twisted his neck to look around. Flames danced, and ashes blew in the wind. The burning limousine threw up thick black smoke into the sky, and the mania that had spread to the masses showed no sign of abating. The streaks of rain became stronger, wetting his hair and streaming down his cheeks.

Rentaro glared at the faraway building, ignoring the rain that was soaking him. It was roughly one kilometer away. At night, with strong winds and the extra rain, it would be hard enough to shoot three times in a row point-blank, let alone having all three rounds go where they were supposed to.

“Bastard… Who are you…?!”

“I’m sorry, Master. I failed. There was a skilled civsec officer guarding her. After I retrieve the Shenfield, I will retreat promptly.”

“A civsec officer? That wasn’t in the intel. It wasn’t just those idiot Seitenshi personal guards?”

Ignoring her angry master cursing “Damn it, damn it” over the radio, Tina put

the Barrett antitank sniper rifle in its case.

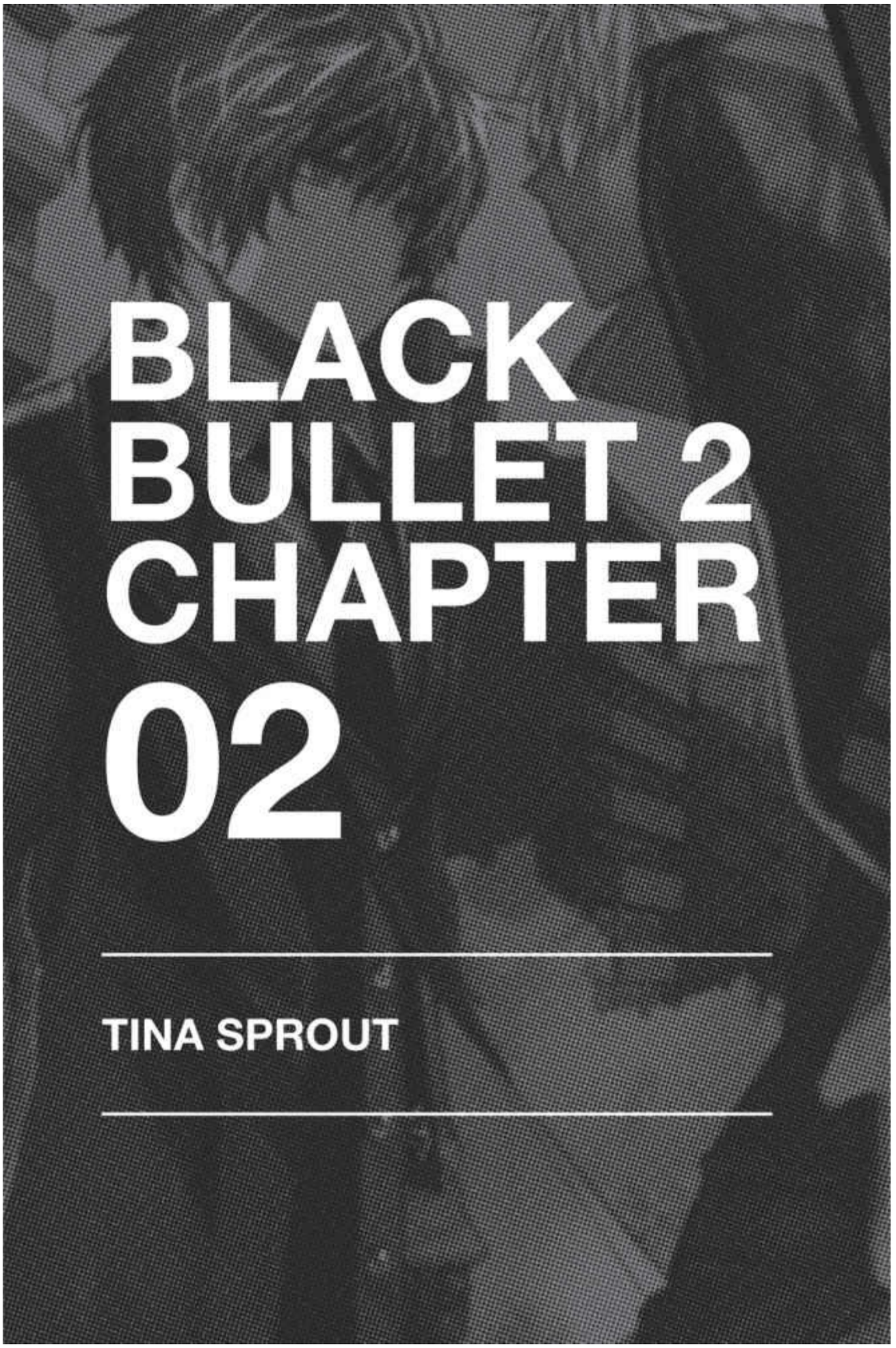
“Hey, did you see the civsec officer?”

“Yes, but it was too far away to see what he looked like.” If Tina had seen correctly, the third shot was kicked away by an Initiator. The antitank sniper bullets Tina used were ranked above all but cannons and Vulcan canons in the ranks of the bullets that existed in this world, and possessed an enormous amount of kinetic energy. *She caught that?*

She was incredibly skilled. A strong opponent.

Tina finished getting ready to withdraw and held down her hair being blown by the eddies of wind around the building. She turned around and looked down, glaring with icy eyes.

“Who are you…? Who got in my way…?”



BLACK BULLET 2 CHAPTER 02

TINA SPROUT

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CHAPTER 02
TINA SPROUT

1

"Here, I bought some." Rentaro rushed back to the bench, handing over the tray he bought at the *takoyaki* stall.

Tina squinted in pleasure as she rubbed her sleepy eyes. "Thank you, very much."

A day off. It was early afternoon and sunlight flooded the government-sponsored park, the grass and trees swayed comfortably in the wind. Inside the park was a small man-made waterfall, and the spray from the falling water felt refreshing on Rentaro's face. Around them, they could hear the sound of families with small children laughing.

Rentaro plopped down next to Tina, opened his wallet once, and sighed, thinking of the hard times ahead. With the current condition of his wallet, he couldn't even spare the expense of two people's worth of *takoyaki*. Rentaro thought for a second that if Kisara continued to work him this hard for inhumane wages, he really would sell himself to Miori's place.

Looking over along the bench, he saw that Tina was wearing a dress, trying much harder than when she wore the pajamas he saw her in before. However—and he wasn't sure if these should be called the finishing touches or not—the buttons on her chest were off by one, and her hair tie was in a strange place. She had probably been too sleepy to try *that* hard.

Just as he thought that, Tina's head drooped as she nodded off. She rubbed her eyes and rustled around in her pocket, fishing out her bottle of caffeine pills and sprinkling them on the *takoyaki*.

"Hey, wait! What are you doing?!" said Rentaro.

"Is something, the matter, Rentaro?" said Tina.

Looking at Tina moving leisurely and looking up at him with upturned eyes, Rentaro's anger somehow disappeared, and he waved his hand and said, "Never mind."

With a long toothpick, Tina awkwardly fished up a ball of *takoyaki* covered with pills and tried to bring it to her mouth. Rentaro watched her on pins and needles until, sure enough, her hand slipped. "Ah, ah…"

The *takoyaki* fell with a *plop!* Rentaro was about to scream. *It cost four hundred yen for six of them!*

Tina looked at Rentaro and lowered her eyes apologetically. It took a lot of work for him to wave his hand to show that he wasn't angry. Ignoring Tina, who had started to grapple with another ball of *takoyaki*, Rentaro shifted gears and leaned back into the bench, looking up at the fluffy, cotton candy clouds.

One week had passed since the attempted assassination. Of course, immediately afterward, there had been a debriefing to decide what countermeasures to take. It would have been fine if it had been a useful meeting about finding the problem in the guard unit or looking back at the incident to see how to prevent it from happening in the future.

But Rentaro had been greatly disappointed in the meeting he attended. Because from beginning to end, all they did during the meeting was push blame on one another, focusing on the question, "Why would a sniper ambush the route the Seitenshi took home?"

Of course, the first people who should have been blamed were the Seitenshi's personal guard, including Yasuwaki, who created the guard plan. However, at the meeting, Yasuwaki said, "This guy! He's the one behind it!" spittle flying, pointing his finger at Rentaro, who was standing in a corner leaning on the wall.

Yasuwaki's reasoning was that even though the Seitenshi had never been

targeted before, as soon as Rentaro was hired, there was an assassination attempt. Therefore, Rentaro must be secretly communicating with the assassin.

This was strange for two reasons. First of all, when Rentaro called to say he would take the job, an office clerk told him, “Then, please come to the Seitenshi’s palace on the appointed day.” And then, when he went to the Seitenshi’s palace, he was put in a limousine, driven to the location of the conference, and then they were attacked on the way back.

In other words, even though Rentaro had been hired as a guard, he was never briefed about his role. This was probably done on purpose by Yasuwaki and the others to exclude Rentaro. Ironically, that was what gave Rentaro an ironclad alibi. Even if Rentaro allowed that he was in secret communication with the assassin, he didn’t know the route, so he had no information to give.

Secondly, and this was the most important point, Rentaro knew himself that he had not been in contact with the assassin. He explained this, of course, but Yasuwaki interrupted him numerous times while he was talking.

Yasuwaki would interrupt, saying things like, “Don’t be fooled!” and “Everyone, you can’t listen to his opinion!” trying to seduce those present at the meeting with his fast-talking. Yasuwaki was furious, and given how many rivals he’d taken down with his wiles, he was eloquent as expected and adept at stretching the truth and splitting hairs.

Summarizing Yasuwaki’s reasoning in one sentence, all he said was “I didn’t do anything wrong,” and did everything in his power to make Rentaro take the blame.

Rentaro, at a disadvantage during the meeting, was saved by the Seitenshi unexpectedly barging in. “I am the one who hired Satomi of my own volition. If you doubt Satomi, then that means you doubt my judgment. More importantly, Yasuwaki, are you treating the hero who saved Tokyo Area like a criminal? You should be ashamed!” she told him curtly.

Yasuwaki couldn’t say anything in response and returned to his seat looking frustrated. However, Rentaro could tell that Yasuwaki hadn’t given up with one look at the fight burning in his vindictive eyes. Smiling creepily and muttering, Yasuwaki’s gaze was more than enough to send chills up Rentaro’s spine.

Afterward, Rentaro heard from a sympathetic staff member that Yasuwaki misunderstood Rentaro and the Seitenshi's relationship as being more than that of a civsec officer and head of state.

What a nuisance. Rentaro crossed his legs and put both hands behind his head, lost in thought again. He did his best to ignore the "Ah, ah…" *plop!* beside him that he was hearing for the second time today.

There was still a lot to think about. What was the assassin after? Looking at it from a historical standpoint, assassinations happened less because of conflicts of interest in political or religious matters and more because of feelings of unjustified resentment or the desire to monopolize a celebrity by a rabid fan. The Seitenshi was more beautiful than the average teen idol, so there was more than enough reason to think she would be such a target.

Since Rentaro took on the job, he did feel a certain amount of responsibility, so he asked a palace staff member to let him into the warehouse where threats and crime notices were managed, recorded, and stored for safekeeping. The threats ranged from the extremely simple, "I'll kill you!" and "Anybody supporting Red-Eyes should die!" to absurd "You are mine, and only mine. I'll *bleep* my *bleep* into Lady Seitenshi's *bleep pant*, *pant*…" that made Rentaro want to say, "Don't put a stamp on something like this and send it." If the Seitenshi saw them, she would probably faint then and there.

Rentaro was flabbergasted at the sheer volume. Even in the year 2031, at the height of Internet use, there were this many analog threats. There were probably many times this amount sent through e-mail.

However, Rentaro had taken all this into account and figured he could ignore the ordinary fan in this case. This was because this incident had the additional element of being cold-blooded and calculating, from the deduction of the route to the long-distance sniping. A regular person who was carried away by his delusions would probably try to shoot the Seitenshi as she got on stage to give a speech before thinking of sniping.

Rentaro sharpened his eyes and rested his chin on his folded hands. This was a dangerous enemy. The Seitenshi couldn't stand for her talks with Saitake to not make any progress, so she had no intention of canceling the conference. Soon,

the second unofficial conference with Saitake would begin. Ever since that day, the existence of the assassin felt like it was growing bigger inside Rentaro day by day.

If only he had a hint about the enemy—

“Ah, ah…”

“Just how many are you gonna drop?!” Looking at the ground, there were three large balls of *takoyaki* on the pavement, which meant that there was no evidence that she had successfully brought a single one to her mouth.

After looking at the *takoyaki* on the ground for a while, she raised her face and made a very serious expression. “Rentaro, this *takoyaki* is trying to run away from my mouth. It’s possible that the octopus inside is still alive—”

“No, it’s not! Here, give me that!” Rentaro took the tray from her and stuck the toothpick into one of the balls, forcing it into her mouth.

Tina briefly made a surprised face, but as she started chewing, her face muscles relaxed, and her face looked very happy. “Rentaro, more please,” Tina said, her body hanging half off the bench, eyes closed, with her mouth open.

Rentaro’s heart skipped for a moment as it seemed like she was asking for a kiss, but then he changed his mind and decided that it actually felt more like feeding a baby bird.

Plop, close. Plop, close. It was so funny to watch Tina give off her aura of happiness and relaxation every time she ate one that before he knew it, Rentaro had given Tina all of his *takoyaki*, as well.

“Here, stay still for a sec.” As Rentaro pulled out his handkerchief to wipe her mouth covered in sauce, Tina narrowed her eyes and lifted her face, letting Rentaro do whatever he wanted with her.

Hearing laughter behind him, Rentaro turned just his head to see a family pointing at them and laughing cheerfully. Rentaro wondered how he and Tina looked to them. For some reason, his heart felt strangely warm.

Leaning back and putting a hand on his hip, he nodded, thinking that she was clean now, and Tina opened her eyes slowly, murmuring slowly and quietly, “I

like you, Rentaro.”

“H-huh?”

He flinched from the suddenness of it all, but Tina seemed to have been looking forward to that reaction and put her hand on her chin.

“This is the first time in my life that anyone’s been so kind to me, I think.” Tina seemed to remember something distasteful and lowered her eyes a little, rounding her shoulders. “I haven’t really had any fun since my parents died.”

“Fun?”

“Yes, ever since then, my life has just been pain. That’s why, right now, I’m having my first fun mood in a while.”

Rentaro paused, not knowing what to say. “Hey, Tina, you said before that you didn’t have a guardian, but what did that mean? Why are you in a place like this in the first place? What do you do normally? Tell me more about yourself.”

Tina’s gaze wavered. “That’s…”

Today marked his fourth time seeing Tina. After their first meeting, she called him on the phone every other day or so. The last time, they went to an amusement park, and the time before that, she said she wanted to see the Outer District, so he showed her around Enju’s hometown, District 39.

To Tina, everything she saw seemed unusual, and Rentaro truly enjoyed watching that face of hers. However, there was also the mysterious side of her that thrust upon him the condition to not tell anyone that he was meeting up with her. Occasionally, if he put together all the information she let slip little by little, he could see that she did not seem to have led a very happy life, but he wondered what that had to do with the condition.

“Hey, Tina—”

At that moment, the cold ring of a cell phone interrupted him. Looking at the sender’s name, the girl’s face stiffened frighteningly for a second.

“H-hey.” Rentaro became worried and stretched out his hand, but Tina slipped away from it and jumped down from the bench.

“Rentaro, I have to go now.” She didn’t wait for an answer as she turned away from him.

For some reason, Rentaro was stricken by extreme uneasiness and called out to her, “Wait,” but she only half-looked back.

The wind blew hard, and the trees around them swayed, rustling their leaves.

Tina smiled as she held down her blond hair. “Let’s meet again, Rentaro.” She gave a polite bow and left.

Rentaro kept looking at her back for a long time after that. Then, it was Rentaro’s cell phone that vibrated. He had a text from Miori. It said to come at once, and she included a geotag to show where she was. Apparently even though it wasn’t a school day she was still at school.

Rentaro raised his face again but Tina had disappeared from sight, and he couldn’t see her anymore.

As Tina walked through the government-sponsored park, she returned the call.

“You took too long,” said the voice on the other end of the line.

“I’m sorry, Master. I was in a place where I couldn’t answer the call.”

“Awaken your consciousness until you can hold a conversation,” ordered the hard, cold voice.

Tina took out the bottle of caffeine pills and poured the rest into her mouth, chewing violently. Grimacing at the bitter taste spreading through her mouth, she crushed the empty bottle and threw it away into a trash can in the park. After walking for a while, her consciousness cleared up to a certain extent. She was probably about 40 percent awake. Still far from a perfect condition. “Yes?” she asked.

“I have received the next Seitenshi guard plan.”

“That was fast.” She thought for sure that the second time, they would be more cautious and that the plan would not be leaked to them, so had given up on it, and this was a bit of a letdown. They must have some really incompetent people around the Seitenshi.

She could hear a small chuckle from the other side of the phone. “We must thank the staff member at the Seitenshi’s palace who’s been so cooperative.”

“What kind of person is our cooperative informant?”

“Just someone whose child was eaten by a Gastrea in front of them. Not an unusual story.”

Tina listened to that with mixed feelings. One of the Seitenshi’s political

slogans was to give the Cursed Children basic human rights and coexist with them. Because of that, she seemed to have many enemies. It was ironic. What the Seitenshi was doing was more than correct as a human being. However, within the palace, there were those near her who would betray her, and Cursed Children like Tina were trying to assassinate her. *It's because you're supporting Cursed Children like us*, Tina thought.

"Our client wants to settle this while they are in Tokyo Area."

"Master, that civsec officer will get in the way again."

"I know who they are, too."

"Really?" Tina pushed the cell phone hard to her ear.

"Apparently, they are part of the Tendo Civil Security Agency. There is still time before the next conference. We cannot allow them to get in the way again." The girl's master gave a short laugh.

She knew exactly what he was trying to say. Tina stopped walking. Her finely honed senses could tell.

"Tina Sprout. I will give you your next mission. Kill the president of the Tendo Civil Security Agency, Kisara Tendo."

2

The hallways of Magata High School were as still as death on the weekends. As Rentaro took off his shoes and changed into indoor shoes, he looked around with a sense of novelty. In middle school, he hadn't belonged to a club, and when he started high school, he started the civsec officer business with Kisara and hadn't had time to join a club. So he rarely ever came to school on a weekend.

Rentaro headed toward the student council room, the sound of his shoes loud in the silent halls, doing his best to ignore the jangling sound of metal following behind him. Most of the students he came across occasionally were shocked after one look at him and would lower their eyes and quicken their pace to pass

him. Well, it wasn't like he didn't understand how they felt.

Rentaro reluctantly turned around and saw the fully armed Kisara Tendo following behind him. She had two fierce-looking SPAS-12 shotguns slung crossing one over the other on her back, a Beretta 92 gun in her left hand, and the murderous blade, Yukikage, in her right hand as she walked. She had different kinds of grenades hanging off the leather belt she wore over her skirt, including fragmentation grenades, incendiary grenades, tear gas bombs, special stun grenades, and a variety of others, so when she walked, she made a loud metallic sound. Kisara, weighing about sixty kilograms all told, walked behind Rentaro without saying a word, increasing her concentration with a strange breathing method.

"H-hey, Kisara."

"Be quiet for a minute," she said curtly.

From the front entrance, they went up the stairs on the far west, turned right, and saw a sign that said STUDENT COUNCIL ROOM. Kisara pulled the slide of the Beretta and made the gun ready to fire, then quickly flattened her back against the right side of the door.

Rentaro cringed and was about to knock on the door when Kisara shook her head as if in disbelief. "Wait, Satomi. Are you planning on breaking through from the front? That's too dangerous. Remember the exam to get your civsec officer license. After throwing in a tear gas bomb, the two of us can shoot Miori to death as she comes out, easy as pie. Two to the chest, one in the head, and we can make that woman say good-bye to this world."

"H-hey, Kisara…… I didn't come here to kill Miori. I came to ask her about the results of the analysis of the bullets found at the scene of the sniping."

"That's pretty much the same thing!"

"No, it's not!" Rentaro was overcome with strain and rubbed the corners of his eyes. Even though Kisara never made any mistakes, why couldn't she keep her cool when it came to Miori?

After saying good-bye to Tina in the park, he called the office to say he was going to stop by Miori's place. The minute he told her, Kisara said, "I'm going,

too," and forced him to meet up with her, which turned into all this. He made a huge mistake in letting Miori's name slip in front of Kisara, but he never dreamed that she would show up heavily armed and ready to kill.

"Hey, Kisara, I'm going to talk to her, so sorry, but you wait outside."

"N-no way! I can't let you and Miori be alone together."

"Why not?"

"I just can't! You are never on any account to meet with Miori alone. When you meet, I must go with you. President's orders."

Rentaro shook his head, thinking he couldn't go along with her any longer, and knocked on the door, turning the knob without waiting for an answer.

"Oh, wait, Satom—," Kisara started.

Suddenly, a hand stretched out from the crack of the door and pulled him into the room, and then the door was closed and locked. Rentaro staggered a few steps and looked back.

Blinds were drawn in the dim room, and Miori stood with her back to the door as she locked it behind her back with a bewitching smile. His eyes were drawn to the brightly colored Japanese-style clothes she wore despite being at school.

"Welcome, Satomi dear."

At that moment, Kisara started banging violently on the door behind Miori's back. "Miori, open up this instant! If you don't, I'll break down the door."

Miori closed her eyes and lifted her chin in the air. "You can if you want, but I'll make sure to send the receipt to the Tendo Civil Security Agency."

The sound of pounding stopped suddenly, and it was replaced by the sound of Kisara gnashing her teeth. Sadly, Kisara, who was so poor she went to Rentaro's place to sponge dinners off him, did not have the financial means to pay for a door.

"Good job figuring out Kisara followed me here."

"I didn't know. But with all that noise y'all were making out there… Why don't we go next door?" Miori pointed at the room next door with her index finger.

Guided by Miori, Rentaro entered her private room. He felt like he had been transported to another world. Besides chairs and tables in strong primary colors that twisted in avant-garde style, there were fifty holodisplays floating in the air.

When Miori swept the displays showing stock prices and economic news horizontally, the displays came together into one giant display, and an aquarium screensaver started up, the surround-sound system playing the quiet sounds of bubbles. The whole room started to glow a dim blue. It really felt like they were in the depths of the ocean.

Thinking of his own worn-out eight-tatami-mat hovel, he looked around the room again. It was hard to believe they were living in the same era. This was a room Shiba Heavy Weapons ordered especially for her. He wondered what she was planning to do with the room after stepping down as student council president next year.

Miori pointed her folding fan toward the display and said, “Seitenshi Sniper Incident Evidence,” and pictures from the scene came up on the panels one after another. Miori stretched her arm out in front of her and enlarged one image, that of the tip of a bullet. “The bullet used by the sniper looks to be one used for a .50-caliber Browning heavy machine gun, but I looked up the rifling, and it’s clean. There’s no record that it was used in a crime before.” Rifling, also called a gun’s fingerprint, referred to the helical grooves left behind on a bullet when it was fired.

Miori opened her fan and rotated it, and the screen changed a few times before settling on a miniature version of the scene of the crime with 3D modeling. Rentaro was unwittingly taken in for a second by Miori’s beautiful form, looking as if she were dancing a traditional Japanese dance.

Miori pointed out the roof of the problem building where the sniper was with her fan and dragged the fan toward the limousine. As she did so, a line showed up on the model image showing a distance of 991 meters. Miori rotated the model so Rentaro could get a better look. “Hey, Satomi dear, just checking… You’re certain the enemy shot from that building? And that the limousine was moving?”

“Yeah… What about it?”

“Satomi dear, how much do you know about sniping?”

“Not much.” He knew so little about the subject that he made sure not to choose it during his civsec officer license exam. On top of waiting in one place for the target to come and using finely honed nerves to pull the trigger, it required an enormous amount of patience and concentration. Rentaro wasn’t confident with either.

“The empty shell case that sank into the road at the scene was retrieved. Looking at the angle of the shot, it does seem highly likely that it was fired from this building, but…”

Miori sounded like something was stuck in her teeth as she spoke, but then lifted her face and continued. “Y’know, Satomi dear, in the year 2031, sniper scopes and rifles have gotten more precise, but in the end, the most important factor in figuring the accuracy rate is still the human factor. And humans’ hearts are always moving, and they have to breathe, so their hands shake slightly. If a sniper can hit a target eight hundred meters away, I consider them expert. A kilometer away is a miracle. From 1.2 kilometers away, it’s a stunt. More than that, and it’s a coincidence.”

Rentaro was shocked. “It’s that hard?”

“Try taking a hula hoop from the P.E. equipment room and using it in a ring toss to try to get a color cone twenty meters away. Sniping is different from a ring toss, but it’ll help you understand just how hard that is.”

“That…is hard…” Rentaro didn’t have to do it to imagine how impossible that would be. He finally understood what Miori was trying to say. She was suggesting that to pull off the feat of hitting a target a kilometer away three times was pretty much impossible.

Then, Miori explained the effects of temperature, humidity, angle, pressure, Coriolis force (how the bullet has a hill-like trajectory and is the highest at 55 percent of the way to its target), and the wind around the buildings that are the natural enemies of snipers.

Rentaro closed his eyes and thought back to the flames of the limousine, the people’s screams, and the glint from the roof of the building. There was no mistaking it. There really was a sniper there who shot from that building. It didn’t

matter what Miori said.

Suddenly, Rentaro asked Miori about a suspicion that came to mind. “Hey, Miori, your company sells weapons wholesale to police and the self-defense force, too, right? Do you know someone called Takuto Yasuwaki?”

“No.”

“He’s the captain of the Seitenshi’s personal guard. Do the Shiba Heavy Weapons files have anything on him? Tell me what you know about him.”

Miori tilted her head and put her hands together, saying, “Search, Takuto Yasuwaki.” When she did, the search started at dizzying speeds, and in no time, the display called up a headshot of Yasuwaki. Next to it was a brief personal history.

“Takuto Yasuwaki. Age thirty-two, male. His rank is second lieutenant. Satomi dear, you’re a master sergeant, so he’s one rank above you.”

“Huh?” There was one phrase he couldn’t let pass without comment. “Hey, Miori, I’m not a soldier, so I don’t have a rank.”

More precisely, since the New Humanity Creation Project was started by the self-defense force, when Rentaro underwent the enhancement operation, he was forced to register as a solider, but his rank was supposed to be that of the lowest soldier. It definitely wasn’t anything as self-important sounding as *master sergeant*.

“Yes, you do. Even if it’s just a pseudo-rank, as your IP rank goes up, your top-secret information access key goes along with it. Your IP rank is 1,000, so you’re a master sergeant, Satomi dear.”

Now that she mentioned it, during the conferment ceremony, he thought did receive a top-secret access key and pseudo-rank to go along with his promotion to rank 1,000. The top-secret access key he got was so low level that he couldn’t get any valuable information. If Rentaro wanted to find out more about his parents and details of the Gastrea War, he needed a higher-level access key, after all. “Well, what can I do with that pseudo-rank, then?”

“Nothing much, really. Since you do roughly the same work as someone of regular rank, you have the right to give orders, but since at most yours is a

pseudo-rank, you don't have the authority to lead soldiers or have them follow your orders."

The right to give orders without the right to lead, huh? "Then, what's the point of those ranks?"

"Giving civsec officers those ranks makes them feel better, and that way they can make people think 'The civsec officers still belong to the country.'"

Rentaro sighed. "Even though they're *civilian* security agencies, they're tied to the government, huh?"

"Well, it can't be helped. The strongest civsec officer pairs are strong enough to change the world's military balance, so countries want to manage them as much as possible. The civsec officer system was originally declared a privatization of military power with great fanfare at the beginning, but these were just empty statements."

Looking at Miori smiling cynically, Rentaro suddenly remembered that he had had a similar conversation with Kisara in the past.

Miori opened up a paint program and used it to draw whiskers on Yasuwaki's face and shave off his hair, starting to hum as she did so. "Anyway, the self-defense force said things like 'The undrawn sword is the pride of peace' to sound stoic and cool, but civilian control stopped working on members of the most aggressive group that had the best results during the Gastrea War, and they started doing things that the old army did. The Seitenshi's personal guard is like a symbol of that."

"Civilian…what is…?"

"Well, to put it plainly, they're bad guys. Also, Satomi dear, guarding a VIP should really be the job of the police, but only the Seitenshi has personal guards at her own expense. But this isn't all good. Do you know why?"

Rentaro looked Miori in the eye and nodded gravely. "They have no expertise."

"That's right." Miori pointed her fan at his nose. "The Seitenshi personal guard is a young organization that just started its operations a mere ten years ago. Naturally they are less proficient than the Metropolitan Police Department's security section guards and have not accumulated as much expertise. Above all,

ten years ago, the Seitenshi's personal guards did nothing more than serve as a wall to block the mass media."

Rentaro was also concerned about that. Even if he was being kind, Rentaro wouldn't say that the way they coped with the situation at the scene was in any way skilled. He sighed. He had to decide soon. Yasuwaki was more useless than expected. And even more alarming was that he hadn't learned anything from the assassination attempt.

"To make a mistake and make it again is a mistake," someone once said. The way things were going, a second assassination incident seemed likely.

Rentaro had to do something himself after all. "Miori, I have a favor to ask. Will you look into Sougen Saitake for me?"

"Why?"

Rentaro hesitated for a second, wondering how much he should tell her, but then shook his head and fixed his eyes on Miori. "He's the one who hired the assassin. I'm pretty sure of it."

Miori whistled happily, saying, "Satomi dear, what a thing to say!"

"But I have no proof. Will you collect some from your end?"

Miori said, "Hmm," and put her hand on her chin. "I'm glad you're counting on me, but you shouldn't expect much. Even if it's what you think it is, unless the head of state of Osaka Area gives some careless order that leaves evidence behind, I'm not going to be able to do much."

"I won't be any worse off. Please."

"Hmm… All right."

"Thanks." With that, Rentaro figured he had done everything he came to do. As he thought that and lifted his face, he saw Miori's face was unexpectedly close to his.

Miori sidled close to Rentaro with flushed cheeks, rested her chin on his chest, and purred. "Hey, Satomi dear, I did what you asked, and I don't want to say I want this in return, but I want you to show me your real power, too, Satomi dear." She was surely talking about his power as a soldier of the New Humanity

Creation Project.

“Jeez, that has nothing to do with you. Anyway, it’s not something to show other people.”

“Satomi dear, do you like Kisara that much more than me?”

“D-don’t say that!”

Miori was a little put out. “If you forget about Kisara, you can do whatever you want with my body, Satomi dear.” Miori put her smooth hand on Rentaro’s chest and pet it, as if drawing circles on it. She put her body right up against his, and he could just see part of her chest from where the collar met, making him strangely excited. He unconsciously met her moist gaze, and Rentaro’s heart pounded as he turned his face away from hers.

“Please, Miori, stop messing arou—”

Suddenly, there was a roar as the door was kicked open, and Kisara panted at the door and then barged in. “What are you two doing?!” Kisara looked in surprise at Rentaro and Miori, looking back and forth a few times before lowering her gaze, putting power into her hand holding her sword, and making it shake so hard it clattered. Behind her back, the door had fallen inward, and it looked like she had ended up destroying the door after all.

Miori gave a small snort where Kisara couldn’t see, as if thinking of something bad, at the same time pulling the sleeve of her Japanese-style clothes in front of her mouth, posing modestly. “Patience, patience, Kisara!”

“Huh?” Kisara blinked, as if all the spite had left her.

“Dear Satomi and I *really*, *truly* didn’t do anything in this room. So don’t misunderstand, Kisara.” Miori fixed the collar of her Japanese-style clothes a few times even though it wasn’t messed up, cheeks flushed.

The sword and gun in Kisara’s hands fell to the ground with a clang at the same time. “No way……”

Miori looked back at Rentaro and said, “Well, Satomi dear, let’s move forward with that, okay?” and ran, departing.

“H-hey, what do you mean, ‘that’?” Rentaro stammered.

Miori stopped and looked back with teasing eyes. “I was talking about how if I give you my body, you would come join my company, Satomi dear. Oh, Kisara. It’s really nothing. Later.” Saying that, she really left the room this time. As she left, she stuck out her tongue where Kisara couldn’t see.

“No way……” Kisara stood with her eyes open in shock, not moving a muscle.

Rentaro pushed down the disturbed feelings in his heart and scratched the back of his head. “H-hey, Kisara, I think you already know this, but that’s just Miori’s way of teasing…… Hey, wait, are you listening?”

Even when he waved his hand in front of her face, her eyes and mouth stayed open, and she didn’t even blink. He wondered how long she had been like that. Finally, Kisara picked up her sword and turned on her heel, walking through the broken door with shaky steps.

“Damn it,” Rentaro cursed, pressing his temple. *You really did it this time, Miori*. Then, his cell phone vibrated. After he saw who was calling, he put his phone to his ear. “What is it, Doc? I don’t really have time for this right now…”

“Hey, Satomi. Do you have a little time after this? I need to talk to you about something important.” The Gastrea researcher, Sumire Muroto spoke disdainfully.

Rentaro kept his mouth shut and lifted his face, looking at the door Kisara had left through, mumbling, “I guess.”

“Then come now. I want to talk to Enju, too, so bring her with you. Later.”

“Huh? Enju, too?” As he said this, he could already hear the dial tone. Even though he wasn’t satisfied, he contacted Enju, and then looked aimlessly at Kisara’s name in his address book. What the heck? Why did she have to misunderstand like that?

He had an excuse to call her now with the pretext of reporting that he wouldn’t go back to the office but would go straight to Sumire’s. Normally, he wouldn’t think so much about it and would just call her, but for some reason, Rentaro lingered nervously in Miori’s room for a while before finally getting up the courage to call Kisara five minutes later.

After about twenty rings, just when he was about to give up, Kisara finally

answered.

“H-hey, Kisara?”

“Who may I ask is speaking?” said an unexpectedly cold voice on the other end of the line.

“Huh? I-it’s me, Rentaro Satomi.”

“Which Satomi?”

“Wh-what?”

She seemed to be bent out of shape. He could easily imagine her on the other end of the phone with her chin lifted in the air, turned huffily the other way, with her arms crossed.

Rentaro scratched the back of his head hard. “Aw jeez, it’s me, the good-for-nothing, weak moron, Satomi! Damn it, that’s what you wanted to hear, right?”

“Oh, *that* Satomi. I remember now.”

Through the phone, he could hear Kisara chuckle slightly and the pressure in Rentaro’s chest let up just a little. “But you forgot ‘the perverted Satomi who was flirting with Miori,’ you stupid, stupid, stupid idiot.”

Just how stupid does she think I am? “That was a misunderstanding.”

“Liar.”

“I’m not lying.”

“Well, it’s not like I care. Even without you, I would be perfectly fine…”

“If I leave, you won’t have any employees.”

He heard a groan on the other end of the line. Apparently, she hadn’t thought that far ahead. “Oh, I’ll just hire someone new. Because then I won’t have to pay your salary anymore, Satomi.”

He almost retorted, “With *that* salary?!” but held back and tried to speak calmly. “Um, Kisara, I think you already know this, but most civsec officers are worthless guys who are former criminals or yakuza-types who have nothing to offer but violence, so you’d be in trouble if you ended up hiring someone like that.”

He heard another groan at the other end of the line. Apparently, she hadn't thought of that, either. "I-I won't let you have Enju!"

Rentaro was fed up. It was extremely hard to tell her, but Enju didn't really like Kisara. Once, when he asked her, "What do you think of Kisara?" Enju replied bluntly saying, "Her boobs are an eyesore!"

He didn't want to boast that Enju liked him more or anything, but if Enju was left to her own devices, he had a hard time finding a reason she would stay with the Tendo Civil Security Agency.

"What about food…? The food you make is gross, isn't it? You come over to eat once every three days, don't you? I mean, even on the days you don't come over, all you eat are boxed lunches and snack breads and other things with unbalanced nutrition, right?"

"What are you talking about? I eat crusts of bread, too!"

Rentaro didn't say anything. Apparently, she was eating crusts of bread, too.

"Besides, I won't get fat eating the delicious food you make, so it'll be a good diet, too."

Rentaro started to become uneasy. If he quit the Tendo Civil Security Agency, it was possible Kisara would quickly die like a dog by the roadside.

"I mean, what? From what you're saying, it sounds like I'm just a poor but haughty rich girl who can't get by on her own and pays low wages while exploiting her employees."

That was exactly what he was saying, but……

"How unpleasant. Now I'm angry. Even if you cry and shout that you want to return to the Tendo Civil Security Agency, it's too late! Good-bye!"

With those last words, she hung up on him violently, but not even ten seconds later, she called him back. "……Satomi, you like bugs and animals and stuff, right?"

Unsure of where this new, calmer Kisara was going, he nodded. "Yeah, well…I liked Fabre's *Souvenirs Entomologiques*, so I guess that just continued."

"Then, I'll tell you a fable so you'll be able to understand easier. Once, there

was a Satomi bug.”

“S-Satomi bug?” He was confused by the sudden appearance of a bug with a name that sounded too much like his own.

“It’s the scientific name. I’m sure it’s because there was a scientist named Satomi somewhere who discovered it first and named it after himself. It has nothing to do with you, Satomi.”

Rentaro didn’t say anything.

“I’ll continue. That Satomi bug was cute as a grub. He was a kind and honest bug who followed the Kisara butterfly, who’ll come out later, around everywhere. However, as he matured, he grew impertinent, and started saying foul things like ‘What the hell?’ Satomi, what do you think after listening to this story objectively?”

“That bug can talk…?”

“Yes, it’s fluent in Japanese.”

Rentaro had no words.

“I’ll continue. One day, the Miori bug appeared in front of the Satomi bug and started to seduce him. This bug was a relative of toilet crickets and cockroaches, a poisonous bug that serves as a carrier for smallpox, malaria, and the Black Death! Oh, but this has nothing to do with Miori.”

The story that was hard to comment on continued. Anyway, crickets were in the order Orthoptera with grasshoppers, and cockroaches were part of the order Blattodea, so they were actually completely different organisms and not related.

“Gallantly appearing on the scene was the Kisara butterfly you heard about earlier. To make a long story short, the Kisara butterfly was a Space God, a messenger of god. By the way, she was supercute, cuter than the Miori bug, at least. The only one who could save the Satomi bug from the evil clutches of the Miori bug was the Kisara butterfly. And to the Kisara butterfly, it was a little sad to think that the Satomi bug who had been with her since they were little would be taken away. In other words, the Satomi bug would become happy by being with the Kisara butterfly. Satomi, what do you think after objectively listening to this story so far?”

Rentaro was starting to get a headache. She wasn't telling this story about bugs and butterflies because she wanted to say that last line, was she? "Just stop being mad already."

"It's not like I'm trying to make up, or anything."

Rentaro was starting to get annoyed. "Hey, Kisara, will you stop already? I'm not going to Miori's place, and I'm going to keep working at your place like I have until now." He realized his slip of the tongue too late and gave a start.

"I don't want you to work for me out of pity! Hmph!"

The angry sound of the phone being hung up made Rentaro think he messed up, and he slumped and hung his head. This wasn't what he was trying to say. He seemed to have been in the student council room for a long time, and when he went outside, the setting sun was dyed a bright red.

Picking up Enju at the statue in front of the school where they had arranged to meet, he continued on foot to Magata University Hospital, where Sumire was.

"Enju, be careful." As he walked past the reception desk and into the university hospital hallway, he looked next to him.

"Hmm? What's wrong?"

"I don't know why Doc told even you to come. I have a bad feeling about it."

"Really? It has been a long time since I have been able to see Sumire, so I am looking forward to it."

Watching Enju swing her fists happily up and down, Rentaro sighed. He had a feeling that even if he looked all over the world, Enju would be the only human who looked forward to seeing Sumire.

Going down the clean, swept hall for a while, they went down the familiar staircase to the basement. As usual, it was dim and smelled strongly of room fragrance, but today, Rentaro could hear a piercing laugh on top of that. The voice that bounced off the walls and reached Rentaro's earlobes sounded like the maniacal laughter of a witch, and even Rentaro, who was used to coming here, hesitated.

Fed up, he passed the demon-engraved people-warding objects and found

Sumire spread out on top of the table laughing uncontrollably. As she moved about on the table, she pushed off test tubes and beakers, and they broke with a crash.

“Hey, Rentaro, look at this article! The yakuza were tricked by the April Fools’ joke about immigrating to the moon and started buying up land on the moon to sell. They’re such dreamers even though they’re yakuza! Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Rentaro’s chest was already filled with the feeling of wanting to go home. The world-renown doctor, Sumire Muroto, had a side of severe necrophilia to the point where she expanded a morgue without permission just so she could live with the corpses.

“Sumire, we came to play!”

Enju waved her hand happily, and Sumire sat up, pushing up her hair, which had been allowed to grow as much as it wanted. And then she sat cross-legged on top of the table, brushing aside the hem of her lab coat, spreading both arms dramatically. “Welcome, Rentaro, Enju. Welcome to my nightmare.”

Sumire looked back and forth between Enju’s and Rentaro’s faces with an ecstatic expression. “Rentaro, you would be better mummified than stuffed, after all. Kisara would definitely be better stuffed than mummified. If she were mummified, then her boobs would stick out, so it wouldn’t look good. Enju…… would be fine as a mummy. Yup.”

“Hmph, what part of me were you looking at when you said that?”

“I don’t care who it is, but won’t one of you die soon? I’m about to die from lack of corpses here. Oops, I almost forgot. It’s been a while, Rentaro. You have an unfortunate face, as usual. It’s depressing just looking at it. Sorry, but could you get some plastic surgery on that face by tomorrow? I can’t stand looking at it anymore.”

“Am I really that depressing?!”

Sumire stood up and stuffed coffee beans into the coffeemaker, put a beaker under it to catch the coffee, and turned it on. When she did, the room echoed the sound of the mill grinding the beans.

“More importantly, Rentaro, I heard you’re doing an escort job or something

interesting like that?”

“Word travels fast.”

“I don’t know much about stuff like that, but I heard you’re up against a sniper this time? I always thought you knew a great deal about sniping. I mean, you are a man with the concentration to gaze at a young girl going to school through binoculars on the second floor, combined with the marvelous patience to wait until a dad brings his daughter into the hot springs. You should be called Love Sniper, you Lolita-complex bastard! Die!”

“There’s no truth in any of what you just said!”

Enju looked at Rentaro with excited eyes. “Is that true, Rentaro?”

“No! Stop it! Don’t give me that look! Anyway, Doc, thanks to you making up stories and spreading them around, Enju thinks they’re funny and broadcasts them to the people who live in our apartment building, which is problematic. You know, the other day when I went to take out the trash one of our neighbors suddenly spit on me! What are you going to do about that?!”

“Yeah, I calculated ahead of time that that would happen when I spread the stories to Enju.”

“You are scum!”

“Thanks, that makes me happy. Watching you get socially destroyed is the last piece of joy I have left.” Sumire laughed evilly.

Rentaro was speechless. Just how much was he supposed to let this person make him despair?

Just then, two beakers filled to the brim with coffee slid toward him on the table. “Well, come on, sit down,” said Sumire.

Watching Enju happily plunk herself down on a stool, Rentaro also grudgingly sat next to her.

Sumire, sitting across from them, put her chin on her hands and lowered the tone of her voice, making a solemn face. “Rentaro, it’s a little late, but congratulations. You defeated Kagetane Hiruko and moved up in rank. Now that you’ve moved up to 1,000th to join the ranks of the high-ranking pairs, I thought

I should talk to you soon about things you should be careful about with the three geniuses other than me who exist in the world."

"The three geniuses?" Rentaro shifted on the chair when he realized the conversation was heading from calm to cloudy.

"Rentaro, what kind of understanding do you have of me as a person?"

Rentaro knew this was a serious question, so he considered. "You were the person responsible for the New Humanity Creation Project."

"I can only give you partial credit for that answer. I am the most brilliant mind in Japan, and I was responsible for the Japanese branch of a mechanized soldier project that spanned four countries: Japan, America, Australia, and Germany."

Rentaro interrupted in his confusion. "What the heck is that…? Wait a minute, this is the first I've heard of it. Four countries? Then—"

Sumire explained solemnly. "The head of the Australia branch, Obelisk, was Professor Arthur Zanuck. The head of the U.S. branch, NEXT, was Professor Ain Rand, and the head of the Japan branch, the New Humanity Creation Project, was Professor Sumire Muroto—in other words, me. And the one who unified all of this and was in charge of everything was a German scientist, Professor Albrecht Grünewald. The four of us are the four people with expertise on mechanized soldier creation. We were called things like the Four Kings, or the Four Sages… How nostalgic."

"'Four Sages'…?"

"That's right. The four of us were the great minds of the world, gathered in order to save the world from the invasion of the Gastrea. Now, Rentaro, do you think we produced great results working together hand in hand? Unfortunately, the answer is no. I'll tell you from the end of the story. The four of us were jealous of one another's ability and hid the results of our research from one another. I'm embarrassed to say that I was the same as the rest, too."

"Why would you do that…?"

Pressed for an answer, Sumire just shrugged her shoulders. "Can you understand? For all of your life, there was not a single person around who could be called your equal, so you became conceited, but then suddenly *three* geniuses

who threatened your existence appeared. I was frightened and extremely jealous at the same time. Coupled with the fact that my lover had been killed by a Gastrea around that time, and I couldn't really see what was going on around me. You should remember what I was like back then."

Rentaro paused. "I do." He nodded, remembering Sumire all skin and bones, with just her glittering eyes. The Sumire now wasn't the person responsible for the New Humanity Creation Project or the Sumire whose lover had just been killed by a Gastrea. She was half-forgotten by the world, but she seemed much happier now than she was back then.

"To continue, in the end, the four of us each used our individual expertise to the best of our ability and created mechanized soldiers." Sumire laughed masochistically, shaking her head slowly. "My heart never connected with any of them during the whole process. Not once. And then, all the projects disbanded a little after the war. Do you know why?"

Casting a sidelong glance at Enju, whose body had tensed with nervousness, Rentaro opened his mouth to speak hesitatingly. "Because mankind realized the high-fighting abilities of the Cursed Children."

"Exactly. Even though it took a huge amount of money to create a single mechanized soldier like you, these girls were born naturally equipped with power that was equal to that of the soldiers. It was only natural for the government to think it was ridiculous to waste money on building the mechanized soldiers, right?

"And so all the organizations were disbanded, and the soldiers were relieved of their duties. Where did they go? Did they decide to live as ordinary citizens to spend the rest of their lives in peace? The answer to this is also no. After the civsec officer system was born, most of the mechanized soldiers went out into the world as Promoters. For them, the disbanding of the organizations just meant that the place where they fought changed.

"The current government is trying to manage the civsec officer system as clients. Well, it's just what those government types wanted. Since civil security agencies are civilian organizations, it's cheaper than having them work for the country. Price wars and other market forces are also involved. Lucky for them,

the mechanized soldiers are also part of these organizations, so governments can just have them form tag teams and make great use of them. And these days, strong mechanized soldiers paired with strong Initiators get great military results, and most of them sit in the seats of the highest ranks. Do you understand what this means?”

Rentaro nodded as he slowly licked his dry lips, and Sumire continued.

“Rentaro, if you have decided to go after your origins, I am not particularly opposed to it. However, if you are going to defeat the enemies in front of you and aim to be among the highest of the highest ranks to get the highest-level top-secret information access key, then you will soon run into mechanized soldiers made by the other three geniuses who have become Promoters. You should be careful. Their abilities may have evolved past what we can even imagine.”

Without noticing it, Rentaro found himself sitting up straight and holding his breath as he listened. Cold sweat dripped down his cheek. He had been holding his breath, and he shook his head as he felt released from an invisible pressure and slowly drew oxygen into his lungs. He could easily imagine how this could become a fearsome path of thorns.

“But Rentaro, it’s not something to be pessimistic about. You already defeated one of Mr. Grünewald’s mechanized soldiers.”

Rentaro looked up with surprise. “Don’t tell me he was…”

“That’s right, Kagetane Hiruko.”

Just hearing that name gave him the chills and made him feel sick to his stomach. Manipulating a repulsion force field with superior defense along with two sinister handguns, Kagetane Hiruko was, without a doubt, the strongest opponent Rentaro had ever faced in his short life. It was more or less a miracle that he had won.

“Only Mr. Grünewald did not have a research lab in his own country, so he had facilities in Japan, Australia, and America. Section 22, which you were in, was under my jurisdiction, but Kagetane’s Section 16 was under Mr. Grünewald’s jurisdiction. Also, it might sound like the Four Sages were equal in their abilities, but Mr. Grünewald’s genius was obviously a rank above that of Arthur, Ain, and

mine. Once, I thought I'd try to steal the knowledge he had of mechanized soldiers and looked at his blueprints, but there was a portion that even I didn't understand."

Rentaro shook his head. Honestly, what she was talking about had gotten too big for him to wrap his head around. Next to him, Enju had her mouth half-open. She probably did not understand half of what she was hearing, either.

"Wait, Doc, are you really that amazing?" There was still a trace of fatigue left in his lighthearted words, but Sumire was indifferent and recrossed her legs.

"What, it's not a big deal. The way you and Enju would read a single book is how I would read a single library. That's the only difference. It's simple, isn't it? You might just think of me as a coroner, but I actually have no particular specialty. Everything is my specialty."

"Then why are you doing autopsies on Gastrea now?"

Sumire hunched her shoulders and twisted her lips in a smile. "It's because I like it. Corpses are great. No idle chatter from them. Oh, but the most unfortunate part about this job is that your patients never say 'Thank you.'"

Rentaro was fed up.

"Just how old are you right now, Doc?"

"Fifteen."

"You're younger than me?! Have you no shame?"

"Silence, or I'll dissect you while you're still alive."

"No, please. Anything but that!"

As if realizing something at those words, Sumire gave a smirk. "Hey, I've been wondering about this for a while, but you have school during the day, go to Kisara's office after school, and then you're with Enju at home, right? As a healthy male hominid, when do you take care of your pent-up frustrations? Tell me."

"Now that you mention it…" Even Enju was starting to look interested.

Rentaro's hips twitched unconsciously. "Hey—! Th-that has nothing to do with

anything. Enju's around, too! What are you saying, Doc?"

"Then don't ask my age, idiot. Everyone has one or two things they don't want people to ask about."

Rentaro sat back down in his chair with a sour look on his face at that severe retaliation. "Doc, you really are a terrible person, aren't you?"

"Of course I am. That's why I have no friends. Did you only just notice?"

Disgusted, Rentaro looked at the large bookcases in the basement room. There was no sign of the person who was once the greatest mind in all of Japan on the bookcases filled with movies and adult video games.

"By the way, did you know, Rentaro? In the first dating sim games, the main character's parameters were set, and if he wasn't above a certain level in intelligence and looks, the girls wouldn't even look at him. Even though it was a game, it didn't contain any dreams or hopes, which kept it from being a great game, so other game companies went in a different direction."

"What are you talking about?"

The enigmatic female doctor took a mechanical pencil from the breast pocket of her lab coat and tapped it on the table complacently. "Well, I was just wondering how far you got with Kisara. Kisara is wasted on someone like you with an unfortunate face obsessed with bugs. It's strange that she hasn't had a conspicuous boyfriend yet. You should be in more of a hurry. For all your rude talking, you can be a gentleman, but you lack the lust for conquest that will allow you to overcome a woman's indecision and make her your own. That's your weakness, you know. Have you noticed, Rentaro?"

"Sh-shut up. It has nothing to do with you."

Seeing Enju looking discontented, Rentaro was startled and averted his face quickly. However, he smoothly slid just his gaze toward Sumire and asked, "Well, what would you do if you were me, Doc?"

"I'd probably slip a sleeping pill into Kisara's drink."

He shouldn't have asked. Rentaro scratched the back of his head.

"Sorry, Rentaro, but you should go home first."

“Why?”

“I have some things to talk to Enju about now. I don’t want you to hear it.”

“Hey, Doc, don’t tell me—” *You’re not going to talk to Enju about her corrosion rate, are you?* Rentaro glared.

But Sumire shook her head. “It’s not that.”

“I…see… Then, I’ll get going. Enju, can you get home by yourself?”

“Yes, no problem.”

Rentaro gave a small wave at Enju and left the university hospital reluctantly.

3

“Why did you have Rentaro leave?”

“Because I thought you wouldn’t want Rentaro to hear this. That’s the kind of thing we’ll be talking about now.” Sumire sat back down into her chair, and it gave a sharp creak. “Enju, let’s make this brief. Have you ever felt sudden chills on the back of your neck when fighting a strong Initiator or when walking around town?”

Enju couldn’t tell where the question was going and was mentally tilting her head in bewilderment, but she answered honestly. “No.”

Sumire recrossed her legs and put a coffee-filled beaker to her mouth. “Let me rephrase the question. Enju, you’re an Initiator who specializes in speed, but has that speed continued to improve? Have you had trouble improving your speed? Where it suddenly stopped getting better?”

Enju put her hands on the table in surprise and leaned her body over the table. “Do you know something about that, Sumire?”

Sumire sank her body deeply into the chair. “It’s just as I thought. You’ve reached your growth limit point, huh?”

Growth limit point. Enju couldn’t help but feel chills at the sound of those words.

Sumire flipped a lamp switch and pulled out a binder from a pile of documents, flipping through its pages to find the document she was looking for. “Enju, will you tell me a little about that feeling in your own words?”

It was like a doctor interviewing a patient, and remembering that Sumire actually was a doctor, Enju righted herself on the stool and sat up straight. “Yes, well, it was not something I was aware of in the past, but the more I used my power, the faster I became. However, that has not been the case recently at all. How can I describe it—?” She couldn’t find suitable words and folded her arms.

Sumire said helpfully, “Is it like you’re running into an invisible wall?”

“That’s it! It feels like I am running into an invisible wall. No matter how much I practice, it does not feel like I am getting faster at all.”

“I see, it’s just as the report says.” Sumire threw the binder onto the desk.

“Sumire, what is this?”

“That is the growth limit point. After an Initiator’s abilities improve to a certain point, they reach a plateau. In conclusion, Enju, your speed will not improve more than this.” The words echoed gloomily in the basement room.

“No… Isn’t there anything you can do, Sumire?!” Before she knew it, Enju had pressed up against Sumire, breathing hard.

Through the curtain of hair that covered her eyes, the doctor looked back at Enju in amusement. “No, there isn’t. However, it’s not all bad. It means that God has proclaimed that you don’t need to get any stronger than this.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in God, Sumire!”

Sumire spread her arms. “It’s regrettable. I think every day that it would be nice if God did exist. However, there is so little evidence that God exists from an objective standpoint that I have merely deferred my opinion for now.” After saying that, she told Enju, “You can go home now,” and turned her back to the girl.

Enju looked at her and cast down her eyes, her mouth opening and closing until she suddenly murmured, “Sumire… What is *Zone*?”

Sumire turned back in surprise and looked at her sternly with narrowed eyes.

“Who did you hear about that from?”

“I overheard rumors about it from Promoters and Initiators that we work with. Doesn’t it refer to very strong Initiators?”

“More accurately, it does not refer to the Initiator herself, but to the state of the Initiator. And, it has nothing to do with you.”

Enju practically threw herself on Sumire as she grabbed her lab coat and shook it. “Sumire, what is this Zone? Does that have something to do with how I can become stronger?”

Sumire showed a moment of indecision.

“Sumire, I must become stronger, whatever it takes!”

That was the last straw, and Sumire said, “Damn,” putting her hand to her temple and flopping into her chair in desperation. “Enju, I will answer your question from before. There is actually a way to overcome your growth limit point. It’s the Zone you were just talking about.”

Enju held her breath, waiting for Sumire’s next words.

“The wall you feel right now is also frustration born of the desire to rip through your growth limit point. It might be easier if you imagine pulling yourself up onto a horizontal bar. At first, no matter how many dozens of times you practice, you can’t do it at all, but one day, you are suddenly able to do it. Once you are able to do it once, there’s no going back. Apparently Zone is like that. And Initiators attain Zone, which breaks through their growth limit point through strict self-control and discipline. It is also called ‘Awakening Zone.’”

“Attain *Zone*…? Awakening……?”

“I’m not an Initiator, so I don’t really know the details, but from the literature I’ve read on it, only a small handful of Initiators can actually attain Zone. And of the super-high-ranking pairs, there are many Initiators who have attained Zone. You and Satomi are probably alive right now thanks in large part to the fact that you have not met anyone who’s reached Zone yet.”

Enju was startled. “Is this Zone thing truly that strong?”

“It is. There is a large difference in ability between those who’ve reached Zone and those who do not. It is said that those without Zone cannot beat those with Zone. When you encounter them, apparently you feel tingling at the back of your neck, so if there is an Initiator your instincts tell you is someone with Zone, you should definitely not get involved with them. You guys fought Kohina Hiruko, who was pretty strong, but since you beat her, she must not have had Zone. If she did have Zone, then there’s no way you two would have survived.”

It was hard to believe this all of a sudden. “If even after all that, I do end up fighting someone with Zone, what should I do?”

“Run away. Take Satomi with you and run as far as you can.”

“Is that the only way?”

“Yes. It would be a different story if you attained Zone, though.”

Not even Enju could hold back her gloomy feelings. The foolish expression about how the super-high-ranking pairs were strong enough to rock the world’s military balance single-handedly suddenly seemed to have a seed of truth in it.

Sumire looked at her with eyes tinged with compassion. “Rentaro and Kisara will probably both continue to become stronger. Enju, they’ll become stronger than you.”

“Stronger than I?” She laughed, thinking it was a joke, but Sumire’s face wasn’t smiling.

Enju crossed her arms and considered. During the fight against Kohina Hiruko, Enju had noticed several weaknesses with Rentaro’s artificial limbs. Rentaro’s artificial limbs relied on the propulsion provided by exploding cartridges built into them to provide an incredible attack power, but they also missed a lot. In actuality, when he fought the swordswoman with two swords, Kohina Hiruko, he used the function in his artificial eye to predict the trajectory of the enemy’s attack before he readied his fist for a counterattack. This was entirely to minimize the risk of missing. Also, because she herself was a speed specialist Initiator, even if she fought Rentaro, she thought she could easily lead Rentaro to miss.

Next was Kisara, and the truth was that she wasn’t sure how their matchup

would be. To Enju, Kisara was almost a complete unknown, and Enju had never really seen her fight. According to Rentaro, she was “crazy strong,” but if Enju thought about it as the strength of a human, then it was hard to believe that she could be a threat to Enju. It was hard for Enju to imagine the two of them becoming stronger than her.

“Enju, do you know the story of the race between the turtle and the hare? The one where the hare falls asleep and is overtaken by the turtle? Enju, why do you think the hare lost to the turtle?”

“Isn’t it because the hare let down his guard?”

“No.”

Enju was surprised and looked at Sumire again. “That’s not it?”

Sumire nodded once. “The answer lies in what the goals of the turtle and the hare were. The hare’s goal was to pass the turtle, so after he passed the turtle, he let his guard down. The turtle’s goal was to finish the race, so he didn’t let his guard down until he was done. It was this slight difference in the way they thought of their goals that resulted in their respective win and loss. Enju, you’re the hare. I’m not just saying this as a joke. Your myopic way of looking at things will likely one day lead you to a definitive defeat.”

Enju opened her eyes wide and shook her head furiously, yelling, “Even if that’s true, it’s something that’s way in the future! It’s not now!” After she said it, she was surprised at herself. She didn’t know why she was yelling so loudly herself.

Before she knew it, Sumire had come in front of Enju and put both hands on Enju’s shoulders, looking her straight in the eye. “Enju, do you understand? Do you understand what it means to attain *Zone*? If I can give my personal opinion, I would strongly urge you to forget it. Try asking Satomi, too. There’s no doubt that he would say the same thing as me.”

Enju had some idea of why Sumire would be opposed to it. It was likely that once she achieved *Zone*, her body’s corrosion rate would increase faster than usual.

If she remembered correctly, her corrosion rate during her last exam was 24.9 percent. That was dangerous, but even if she were able to attain *Zone*, if she

used it sparingly, it shouldn't be a problem, right? Was it really something that should garner that much opposition?

Sumire looked sad that she was unable to deter Enju's motivation and murmured, "Let's leave it at that for today," cutting their discussion short. "You should just prioritize the job you have in front of you right now. Let's take our time to talk about this after you've taken care of your escort duties."

Sumire waved her hand, seemingly done with this conversation. Even though Enju was not quite satisfied, she could do nothing but nod.

"By the way, Enju, what is the Lady Seitenshi's guard like right now?"

Enju wasn't sure how much she should tell her, but in the end, she told Sumire everything.

After Sumire heard everything, she put her elbow on the table and cupped her chin in her hand, making a troubled face. "Isn't that…bad…?"

"Hmm? Why?"

"To be able to deduce the Lady Seitenshi's guarded route means that the enemy has considerable ability to gather information. It's likely that it has also been leaked that the Tendo Civil Security Agency has been hired to guard her. If I were the assassin, in order to make sure my second assassination attempt succeeds, I would crush the Tendo Civil Security Agency decisively. This is bad, Enju. Hurry up and tell the other two."

4

"Master, will you give me more information about the Tendo Civil Security Agency?"

"What do you want to know?" The voice on the other end of the headset responded immediately after she asked.

Tina Sprout tilted her head, gazing at the half of the sun setting beyond the faraway building. The busy shopping district she just left had been filled with annoying oily smells and had a ton of vulgar people. It was hot enough during

the day to make one sick, so she was quickly coming to hate Tokyo Area, but the setting sun was the only thing that was beautiful enough to touch her heart.

I do like the night, after all, thought Tina to herself as she waited for the light to turn at the scrambled intersection. “Master, I do not know much about Tokyo Area, but I think Tendo is the same as the last name of the Seitenshi’s aide, Kikunojo Tendo. Are they related in some way?”

“Yeah, the president, Kisara Tendo, is Kikunojo Tendo’s granddaughter. However, she is currently estranged from the Tendo family and is running the Tendo Civil Security Agency independently. Oh? Her personal background is pretty interesting—”

She suddenly felt eyes on her and looked back, seeing an elderly woman staring blatantly at what Tina was holding in her right hand. The woman was looking at a khaki-colored gun case. It was even thicker than the case she used for the huge antitank rifle she used last time, and even with her power released, it was still heavy enough to make her tired.

“—the president, Kisara Tendo, lost her parents when they were eaten by a Gastrea that strayed into the Tendo residence when she was a child, and she herself was so stressed from that time that she lost the function of her kidneys.”

“Her kidneys?”

“That’s right. On top of that, this incident appears to have been premeditated murder, and the culprit is said to be someone from the Tendo family. Obsessed with revenge, Kisara Tendo madly honed her swordsmanship and left the Tendo family. Even now, it is said that she is just waiting for the opportunity to kill everyone in the Tendo family.”

“That’s…” It was a very bloody story. On top of that, she was a master swordswoman, huh…?

“I don’t know if it’s because they have no money or if it’s because they value quality over quantity, but there is only one pair employed by the Tendo Civil Security Agency. These guys are the ones who got in our way the other day.”

Tina lifted her face in surprise. “What are their names?”

“The fact that their names don’t come up on the list means that their

information is being protected by the government. Oh, but their names have been leaked onto the Internet."

For some reason, Tina made a hard fist as she waited for his next words.

"The Initiator's name is Enju Aihara, and the Promoter is—"

Just then, a truck cut in front of her blasting its exhaust loudly. Tina covered her other ear as she shouted, "Excuse me, Master, what did you say—?"

"Hey, how long are you planning on standing there? Will you please move?"

Tina turned, and the elderly woman from before was looking at her with an angry expression on her face. When she looked forward, the light at the scramble intersection had turned green, and everyone around her had started walking at once.

Tina made a hurried bow and lifted the case, cutting across the geometric pattern made by the white lines. Continuing on by turning into a few narrow alleys, she reached an area of drinking establishments. Probably because of the time of day, there were not many people around.

Following her master's navigation, she soon saw a small building. It was a dingy four-story building. She twisted her neck to look at the height of the building. She had proposed sniping Kisara Tendo down beforehand, but her master rejected that idea promptly. She could see now that she would not have been able to secure a field of fire here. She had no choice but to barge in directly and shoot her down, after all.

The building in question was called Happy Building, and its tenants from the first floor up were listed as SPERRGEBIET, MA CHÉRIE, TENDO CIVIL SECURITY AGENCY, and KOFU FINANCE. *Sperrgebiet* meant "no trespassing zone" in German, and *Ma Chérie* meant "my love" in French. The sign did not say what kind of stores they were. Was Kofu Finance some sort of financial consulting company?

Tina dropped the gun case she held in her right hand to the ground with a heavy sound. She opened the case up left and right, and an enormous gun appeared. It was an M13 made by the General Electric Company. It was a Gatling gun that used the power of a battery pack to make a bundle of six barrels rotate, allowing for continuous fire.

She was not that good at using weapons other than sniper rifles, but as part of learning the conventions of killing, she had also learned how to use general weapons and explosives. Up until now, she had always sniped at her targets through an optical scope, so she was slightly nervous, but it was not enough to be a problem.

Tina put the bullet box feeder connected to the Gatling gun on her back. Passersby were giving her dubious looks as they passed, but because she was doing it so blatantly, no one screamed or called the police.

Tina was planning to ask her master for a vacation after the Seitenshi's assassination was over. She was sure that her master would strongly oppose her staying in Tokyo Area after the assassination was completed, but she wanted to avoid leaving this place without saying anything to *him*.

Tina put her hand to her chest. It was strange. She had only seen him four times, yet she felt like she could do anything for him. Even though she had never done anything but kill people, she was amazed that her heart could still beat for someone else like this. Her heart was warm. She felt like she could do anything.

Tina closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and exhaled. "Master, could I lose against Kisara Tendo?"

She heard a loud laugh on the other end of the phone. "There's no way. No way. According to my calculations, there's not even a one percent chance that you will lose against Kisara Tendo. According to the information, Kisara Tendo is alone in the office. Make sure you get rid of her."

"Roger, Master. Ending call now."

Tina quieted her footsteps and entered the building. Perhaps to save on maintenance fees, there was no elevator, so the only way to get to the upper floors was to take the stairs.

Sperrgebiet on the first floor was a bar. It looked like they weren't open for business yet, and the lights were off and no one was around. Compared to the bar on the first floor, it was much easier to tell what kind of store Ma Chérie on the second floor was. There was wallpaper pink enough to make a flamingo feel nauseated and a disco ball. They were also not open yet, but it looked like some kind of sex establishment.

Tina silently climbed up to the third floor. In order to use the Gatling gun in an indoor battle, the barrels were shortened as much as possible to make it more compact, so it did not get in the way of her movements much.

Tina quietly pushed open the shabby door with a sign that said TENDO CIVIL SECURITY AGENCY hanging on it. At a large work desk facing front, a black-haired girl that she thought to be Kisara Tendo sat with her shoulders squared, writing something.

Seeming to sense someone coming in, the girl put down her fountain pen, crossed her arms in a huff, and looked the other way, as if saying, “I’m still mad, you know.” It seemed as if she had Tina confused with someone else. It was a chance Tina would not get again.

“You are…Kisara Tendo…?”

“Huh?”

Seeing the girl lift her face and open her eyes in surprise, Tina prepared for the gun’s recoil by firmly placing her feet onto the ground. “Prepare yourself.”

Pushing the trigger button, the body of the gun started spinning from the battery power, and immediately after, there was an ear-splitting explosion, and the Gatling gun spit fire.

In the blink of an eye, Kisara crouched down reflexively, but the work desk and walls were all covered with holes, and ricocheting bullets destroyed the glass on the pictures and the glass water pitcher, penetrating the sofa of the lounge set and scattering feathers everywhere. This was the true value of the massacre weapon, the Gatling gun, a high-speed rifle that could spit a hundred rounds a second. Compared to the menacing threat of this rapid-fire weapon that could turn their target to pieces, the shots of a normal machine gun were about the same level as a fly landing on something.

After getting knocked backward from the strong recoil from the five-second salvo, Tina released the trigger button and looked around the inside of the office. Riddled with bullet holes, the inside of the office looked like a tornado had passed through it.

There was a sharp smell of gun smoke as papers drifted through the air, and at her feet was a pile of empty cartridges the gun had spit out and a mountain of

belt links. A heartbeat later, a Klimt reproduction fell, frame and all, to the ground with a small sound, and Tina could see powdered mortar floating in the air in the diagonal shaft of light shining in from the window.

She was sure that Kisara Tendo had left the world without knowing exactly what had happened. Tina could only pray that the other name for this gun, Painless, was the truth.

Thinking to check the corpse, Tina stepped into the room. Just then, as if waiting for that moment, Kisara rushed out from the side of the ebony table with her hand on the handle of her sword. The cold eyes peeking out from under the long, disheveled hair were like carnage.

Suddenly, Tina's master's voice replayed in her head. *Obsessed with revenge, Kisara Tendo madly honed her swordsmanship—*

Tina got chills and reflexively bent backward, and there was a high-pitched screeching sound as something scraped right next to Tina at high speed. A lock of Tina's blond hair that lagged behind was cut diagonally, along with the barrels of the Gatling gun, and there was a loud roar like artillery shells crashing into one another as the whole building shook. Behind her, the wall was split in half vertically. Tina looked at the unbelievable spectacle in shock.

Was she within range of Kisara's sword attack? Tina thought it was impossible, but the glint of Kisara's sword had just sliced the wall and a number of Tina's hairs, and it cut the steel body of the gun like butter. Tina cursed her master who gave Kisara Tendo the too-low rating of a less than 1 percent chance of winning. She felt chills up her spine. It wasn't a joke. Her abilities were unmistakably at the upper limit of what a human could achieve.

However.

Tina jumped left and right like she was doing a triangle jump and kicked twice, sticking to the ceiling, and then while her vision was upside down, ran past on the ceiling. She saw Kisara glare as her sword-drawing technique started to go out of control. Right after, the two sword-drawing attacks she unleashed as quickly as meteors landed far behind Tina.

They were too slow. Tina, who was looking down at the inside of the office upside down, ran until she was right above Kisara Tendo and kicked the ceiling,

falling inverted down on her.

Kisara's face paled, and she slid backward, but that was all within Tina's predictions. Tina brought down the Gatling gun that weighed a little over twenty kilograms. She wasn't aiming at Kisara but at the floor. The blunt and heavy steel weapon that was brought down with the fierce power of an Initiator destroyed the flooring. Not only that, but it also easily shattered the concrete block with a 24-Newton force, shattering the fragments and making them explode into Kisara.

To Kisara, it was like being shot with a shotgun. Even though she quickly raised her arm to block, she was showered with blows to her stomach and chest, and dropped her sword, thrashing against the wall.

Without hesitating, Tina calmly calculated the most efficient way to destroy the swordswoman in front of her and used the superacceleration of an Initiator to ram against her shoulder. With a roar, the wall collapsed, and Kisara was drained of strength against the wall. It was still.

This was it.

Breathing a sigh of relief, Tina swiped the sweat from her brow. Then her eyes became as cold as ice, and she decided to do what she had to do. She took the body of the Gatling gun that had turned into a soldering iron from all the shots it fired and pushed it against the limp Kisara's stomach, forcing her awake.

Kisara let out a painful groan and brushed back her hair. Grinding her teeth, trying to bear the pain, she opened her eyes in slits and looked at Tina. "Who… are you?"

"There is no need for you to know."

"Why is a child like you…?" Kisara started.

Tina's thoughts were troubled by the anxious look in Kisara's eyes. Even though Kisara had suffered serious damage, why was she concerned about Tina?

Tina was deeply irritated at the incomprehensible girl and made a hard fist, putting her face close to Kisara's. "You will die soon. That has nothing to do with you. You are about to die. You will disappear from the world without becoming anything; you will not leave anything behind. I will now kill you in such a way that

even those who love you will not be able to tell that the pieces are you. Do you understand? You are going to die now!”

Kisara shook her head slowly with a tired look on her face. “You are afraid to kill people, aren’t you?”

Tina’s eyes opened wide, and before she knew it, she was strangling Kisara’s thin neck. Her fingers sank delightfully into the girl’s smooth, white skin, and Tina could almost hear the grating of her bones.

Kisara shook her head slowly left and right without a sound, a sad expression on her face, but soon her expression turned into a grimace. Her body started to convulse, and her consciousness clouded. She squeezed her voice out forcibly through lips that had turned purple. “Help…me…Satomi… No……”

Tina was so surprised that the force in her hands let up for a second. *What? Who’s Satomi?*

“Tendo Martial Arts Second Style, Number 16—!” Suddenly, just as she heard a voice that could barely contain its anger come from the side, something rushed into her with the force of a bullet. *“Inzen Kokutenfu!”*

On instinct, she let the top half of her body spring backward, and immediately after, there was the sound of a roundhouse kick grazing her cheek. She jumped aside with a backflip.

Backup? Tina thought. She made sure to get enough distance between them and, with her hand still on the ground, lifted her face.

—And then, her world froze.

“No way…” Between the space between her cracked lips, a hoarse voice that didn’t sound like her own slipped out. “No way… No way, no way… No…… There’s no way…” Tina shook her head slowly and moved backward. The connections in her brain were shorting and getting ground down, and inside, her feelings were a stirred-up mess. Her legs shook, and feeling sobs about to leak from her throat, she hurriedly held them back.

Since he showed up at this time, she had no doubt that it meant that the enemy in front of her was the civsec officer employed at this agency who had interfered with her sniping. His compact and toned body was covered in a school

uniform that looked like a black suit. Behind that brusque attitude was a stupidly honest person who was sincere and good at taking care of others. She had learned this from her short acquaintance with him.

She had liked him. She thought he was a good person. She had trusted him.

Tina ground her teeth in frustration as she held back her tears and screamed, “Why…! Why, Rentaro?!”

Rentaro was just as shocked.

The dark rage scorching his chest collided with the momentary charm and stopped Rentaro’s movements. “Why are you…?”

Tina looked down and shook her head, murmuring like she really did not want to say. “Because you will get in the way of my assassination.”

“I see, so you’re the……” Rentaro bit his lip hard and closed his eyes. And then he asked himself what he should do. He slowly opened his eyes.

Tina also looked like she was smiling and crying at the same time as she desperately put both hands on her chest. “But Rentaro, I……”

Rentaro used the Tendo step to close the gap between them and unleashed *Homura Kasen*, a straight punch with all his strength behind it. It scraped the shaken girl’s cheek. There was a short scream, and a sharp, cutting pain welled up in Rentaro’s chest.

However, Rentaro did not listen to Tina’s scream. He couldn’t listen to it. He thought he should take the Gatling gun she held and grabbed at it, but she resisted half-reflexively and pushed Rentaro away with the tremendous physical strength of an Initiator. The momentum pushed the trigger button, and the body of the Gatling gun pointed at the sky exploded. It took everything he had to suppress it.

In the midst of the sound of gunfire, Rentaro ground his teeth and screamed behind him. “Kisara! The floor… Cut it……!”

He could sense Kisara behind him suddenly leaping to action with the sword in her hand. “Tendo Martial Arts Sword Drawing Third Style, Number 8—” Her deep exhalation made the air in the room tense in a second.

With all the noise from the gunfire, he shouldn't have been able to hear it, but Rentaro was sure he could hear the clear sound of steel sliding out of the scabbard. "*Unebiko Yuusei*—Go swiftly, Yukikage!"

The calamity that occurred immediately afterward could scarcely be called a physical phenomenon. It felt like Rentaro's field of vision was cut into a number of pieces, and along with the cracking sound of an icicle being cleft in two, all around the room were cuts carved in every direction.

Suddenly, the world tilted in a way that made it impossible for him to continue standing. The floor had been cut off. Along with the nauseating floating feeling was a destructive collapsing sound. Bodies pulled by gravity, Tina and Rentaro were being dragged down as they grasped each other.

Seeing that Tina seemed confused about what had just happened, Rentaro saw his chance and positioned himself above her, keeping her below him as the floor of the next floor down approached with tremendous speed, slapping her down on it.

"Guh…" The air was knocked out of Tina's lungs, and Rentaro readied a fist in order to knock her unconscious.

But his enemy was not one to go down easily. Just as he saw her leg spring up, he felt a sharp pain in his lower jaw, and there was a ringing inside his head as his vision started to black out.

He stumbled for a few steps, but then shifted to step firmly. Not yet.

"Tendo Martial Arts Second Style, Number 14—"

"Listen to me, Rentaro!"

"—Inzen Genmeika!"

He repeatedly aimed sharp kicks where he predicted she would move to avoid him. The kick that got a clean hit on the arm the girl put up to block blew the small girl away, and she broke past the window behind her and fell from the second floor.

Tears fell from Tina's eyes, and they glittered, reflecting the glass of the window until they finally disappeared.

Rentaro drew the gun at his hip, not letting his guard down as he approached the side of the window. He looked down timidly but did not see any sign of her save the small dent on the hood of the car parked in front of the building.

She appeared to have run away.

“Satomi, did you win?”

Looking back, he saw Kisara in the midst of the thick dust, holding a handkerchief to her mouth as she climbed down to the second floor. Rentaro looked away from Kisara and looked once more past the broken window. A crowd had gathered nearby, and the police would probably show up soon.

“I didn’t win. She ran away from me…”

“I see…”

Kisara came to stand next to Rentaro and followed his gaze, then looked sideways at him anxiously.

“Did you know her?”

“Yeah…” Rentaro remembered Tina’s face when she was almost crushed by self-denial, and his chest tightened.

From the looks of it, she had not known who he was when she approached him. However, if she was the assassin after the Seitenshi, and if she was trying to take the life of the president of the Tendo Civil Security Agency that was trying to stop the assassination, then there was no room for discussion.

Assassin and bodyguard. Two absolutely incompatible positions. Despite that, Tina had obviously been trying to talk to him. And the one who had pushed away her outstretched arm and forced their parting was none other than himself. Rentaro gripped his XD with both hands and shut his eyes hard, holding it and praying.

How long did he stay like that? He tried to force himself to switch gears by surveying the damage inside, and then he scratched his head. “What are we going to do about this, Kisara?” Looking up, he saw a large hole providing nice ventilation between the second and third floors that couldn’t possibly be fixed. On top of the concrete dust irritating his throat, there was also the smell of paint

thinner coming from somewhere in the building, which was starting to make his head hurt.

When Enju came back and saw that the office had turned into Swiss cheese, she would surely be surprised.

Fortunately, the cabaret on the second floor still had some time before they opened, so no one was around, but the proprietress would be coming in soon to get ready to open. Rentaro had no confidence that he would be able to explain the situation well. He shot Kisara a critical gaze that said, “You didn’t have to destroy everything so thoroughly.”

Kisara blushed, put her hand on her hip, and looked up at him through her lashes. “What? You’re the one that said to cut it, Satomi!”

“That’s true, but—”

“D-die, you scoundrel!” Suddenly, yakuza with long daggers in each hand rushed in shouting, nearly blowing Rentaro away.

When he looked carefully, Rentaro saw that they were the yakuza from the loan shark upstairs, Kofu Finance.

Looking left and right and seeing no sign of the enemy, they became restless and looked very strange. They must have been very confused, because some of them were using the lid of a pan as a shield, and some were even wearing the pot itself on their heads. All of them had shaking knees. The reason for their late appearance could be deduced somewhat by that attitude.

A representative came over to where Rentaro was, scratching his head in confusion. It was Abe, who had a surprisingly comical face when he took off his sunglasses.

“R-Rentaro, bro, Tendo, sis, what’s goin’ on here? It’s not a raid?”

Kisara took a step forward and spread her arms levelly. “This has nothing to do with you guys. I believe the police will come soon, so you should put away whatever you don’t want them to see. Come on, hurry on home now!” She clapped her hands, and the members of Kofu Finance reluctantly headed out the door, looking at one another.

Yakuza being pushed around by a high school girl. It was a strange sight.

“Satomi…” Saying that, Kisara, whose back was to Rentaro, suddenly leaned toward him as if about to fall.

He hurriedly caught her shoulder. It smelled sweet and felt too dainty and soft to be that of a master swordswoman. Rentaro felt his whole body heat up, and he was afraid Kisara would hear the too-fast beating of his heart. “H-hey, Kisara, this is no time to play aroun…”

Then, he suddenly realized.

While Rentaro had been rushing around, Kisara had been practically killed. Even though she was his boss, she was still a girl. After being met with such a dangerous situation, wouldn’t she want to cry on someone’s chest? With such sweet expectations, he held her and peeked at her face—and then the blood drained from his face.

Kisara’s handsome face was twisted in pain, and she held her lower abdomen as she bit her pale lips.

“Hey, Kisara? Kisara! Get ahold of yourself! Hey!”

Then a lightbulb flashed in his head, and he gritted his teeth. This wasn’t from the damage she sustained from fighting. It was her kidneys malfunctioning.

5

The sounds of regular and intermittent machinery echoed through the white hospital room.

“I never thought that our office would be targeted. We’ve been doing pretty well recently, so I let my guard down a little,” Kisara muttered as she sat down in a reclining chair, smiling weakly at Rentaro. “I don’t look that cute here, so I didn’t really want to let you see me in a place like this, though.”

“It’s too late for that. Just because I see you like this doesn’t really make me think anything special.” Rentaro was lying. Kisara usually looked unhappy, giving orders in her refined and energetic way. He couldn’t stand to see her looking like

a puppet with its strings cut, sprawled with her arms and legs stretched out on the chair.

On her arm with the sleeves rolled up, there were needles sticking in her veins, which were connected to the dialysis equipment next to her. An artificial kidney called a dialyzer worked in the place of Kisara's malfunctioning kidneys, filtering out the toxins from her blood.

Two or three times a week, she would spend four or five hours this way. And this was the reason she could not fight on the front lines as a civsec officer. Kisara had always strongly refused Rentaro's attendance at her dialysis treatments. Knowing that she probably didn't want him to see her bound by the dialysis equipment after all this time, Rentaro was embarrassed at himself for being inconsiderate. Now that he thought about it, Kisara also made sure to never show Rentaro or Enju when she took her insulin shot after meals.

The sun had almost completely set, and it was dark outside the window. The streetlights were giving off a dubious light. Earlier, there was announcement that it would be lights out soon.

After Kisara collapsed, Rentaro panicked, almost dropping his cell phone multiple times before he managed to call the ambulance and bring Kisara in.

"Again, Miss Tendo?" said the nurse in an unsurprised and angry voice. Watching Kisara apologize with a wry smile, Rentaro could tell that Kisara was not very assertive about going to her dialysis treatments.

A young nurse who seemed friendly with Kisara said, "Oh? So you're the one Miss Tendo was talking about…" with a meaningful smile, walking around Rentaro to look at him. She finally turned on her heel and said, "When you're done, press the nurse call button," waving a hand and leaving.

Currently, only Rentaro and Kisara were in the room with the dialysis equipment, and the other three sets of equipment for patients to use were not operating. Rentaro sat quietly watching Kisara's dialysis on a chair nearby. "Doesn't that hurt?"

"I'm used to it…"

"You should get a kidney transplant."

“I can’t find a donor that easily, you know. Besides, if it’s someone not related by blood, there’s a high possibility that my body would reject it.”

“Didn’t Doc say something about how there’s some IPS thing now?”

“Oh, you’re talking about induced pluripotent stem cells, right? Dr. Sumire doesn’t need to tell you about that. But I’ll refrain.”

“Why…?”

Kisara leaned back against the chair, stared at a point of empty space, and finally stretched out a hand as if grasping something. The hospital ward was quiet and a little chilly at night.

“This pain is mine and mine alone. I decided that my life would only be used to erase the Tendos from this world. If I forgot this pain, I’m sure I would forget my revenge, as well. That’s why I can’t.”

“Wouldn’t it be all right to forget, too? You have Enju now, right? You have me!”

Kisara looked bewildered for a second, gaping, but she then she lifted the corners of her mouth and smiled. “You’re right. Thank you.”

Rentaro looked down and gnashed his teeth in deep despair because he could tell that the second he yelled, Kisara’s true feelings, which had surfaced a little, sank underneath as a fake smile floated to the top in its place.

His words would not reach her. He could not stop her revenge. Rentaro’s chest tightened as he looked at Kisara and her pale beauty once more.

Tendo Martial Arts Sword Drawing Third Style, Number 8: Unebiko Yuusei. What in the world was that thing she used against Tina? Even Rentaro, who had been with her for ten years, had never seen that terrible move before. It was likely a special attack she’d polished through years of persistence, in order to obliterate the Tendo family.

Even thinking about it now, its terrifying destructive power gave him shivers. It was a move that cut an entire room to slivers in an instant. No matter how many times he ran a simulation in his head, Rentaro couldn’t figure out how he would deal with it if the attack was directed at him.

Was this the true strength of the Tendo-killing Tendos, Kisara?

“Kisara, aren’t you…” *Aren’t you stronger than me with my power unleashed?* He couldn’t ask this no matter how hard he tried. If the answer to that was yes, he didn’t know what kind of face he was supposed to make.

The buzzer indicating that the dialysis was finished sounded. Once Kisara knew that her blood was purified, she removed the equipment with practiced hands without pressing the nurse call button.

Those hands stopped suddenly, and Kisara looked at Rentaro hesitatingly. “Satomi, when that girl was attacking me…did you hear me calling your name?”

“Hmm? Did you say something?”

Kisara looked relieved and shook her head gently. “It’s fine if you didn’t hear it.” After another heartbeat, she looked at Rentaro with her eyes filled with resolve. “Satomi, there’s just one problem left that hasn’t been resolved. The incident with Miori.”

Rentaro slumped his shoulders, fed up. “Will you stop with that already?”

Just when they were finally able to talk normally, too.

Kisara stood up and brushed the dust off her skirt, then pointed her index finger at Rentaro’s nose. “No. I hate having things left ambiguous. I won’t ask about what amazing thing Miori did to you, and you don’t have to talk about it. I-I probably won’t be able to keep a cool head if I heard about it……”

She didn’t do anything! Please, just stay coolheaded! These words stuck in his throat.

Kisara unhurriedly twirled her black hair around her fingers, and seemed restless as she recrossed her legs. “Watching Miori’s actions, I also learned something. It’s true that the salary I pay is on the low side—”

His boss in her black sailor school uniform walked to the window and turned around, closing the curtains with her hand behind her. After a slight hesitation, she looked up at Rentaro through her lashes. “Th-that’s why, Satomi, you can… hold my hand.”

“Huh?” Rentaro raised his voice hysterically.

“My hand. I said that I would let you hold my hand!”

Rentaro paused. “Why your hand?”

“What, you don’t like it? You know, letting you hold my hand is a pretty big deal.”

“What part of it is?”

Kisara turned quickly to the side, pouting and muttering, “I mean… it’s…like we’re l-lovers or something, don’t you think?”

Rentaro was even more discomfited, so Kisara braced herself, making her muscles hard, and stuck her hand out at him with her eyes closed. “Satomi, hurry up…… I’m so embarrassed, I think I might die,” she urged.

A mesmerizing smell emanated from Kisara, and Rentaro started to breathe harder naturally. From her collarbone to her shoulder and waist, her feminine lines were beautiful no matter how many times he saw them.

Sumire’s words passed through the back of his mind.

“For all your rude talking, you can be a gentleman, but you lack the lust for conquest that will allow you to overcome a woman’s indecision and make her your own. That’s your weakness, you know. Have you noticed, Rentaro?”

“K-Kisara, I……”

“Satomi, wait, no way…… What are you touching…? That’s not my hand, that’s my chest…… W-wait… Satomi. I wasn’t planning on allowing you to go that far… Oh, but I may have Miori beat with these.”

“Hmm? The size, shape, elasticity… They are utterly faultless. It is vexing, but even I must give them a triple A-plus.”

“Huh? Vexing?” Opening one eye slightly, Kisara saw Enju grasping her chest tightly with a serious expression on her face and hurriedly jumped backward. “E-Enju? What are you doing?”

“I am the one who wants to know! After I got back to the office, I was surprised to find it full of holes. And then after I asked the police and had them show me where to go, I find you here with your breasts hanging out, tempting Rentaro!”

“They’re not hanging out, and I’m not tempting anyone!”

Rentaro stood with his mouth half-open at his wits’ end, watching their exchange.

Finally, Kisara gazed fixedly at Rentaro with wet eyes, trembling slightly. “Since Enju touched them, that means you, her guardian, touched them! With this, you’re mine, Satomi. I-I won’t let anyone else have you!” A single tear ran down Kisara’s cheek, and she ground her teeth as sobs threatened to escape, but she lifted her eyes sharply and somehow managed to finish her words.

If you were that scared, you shouldn’t have said you’d let me hold your hand. Could it be that all rich girls were extremely idiotic individuals?

Enju puffed out her cheeks and jumped over. “Rentaro, Rentaro. I have no idea what happened.”

Rentaro leaned over to her eye level and quickly explained the details of the attack on the office and how it was linked to the attempted assassination of the Seitenshi. He hesitated but hid that he knew Tina beforehand.

After she finished listening, Enju looked disappointed, like she had missed out on something. “What, is that what happened? Then, we just have to finish protecting the Lady Seitenshi, right?”

“Y-you know what…? That’s easy for you to say, but—” *No*, Rentaro stopped and shook his head. Now that he thought about it, she was exactly right. What Rentaro had to think about was not Tina’s or Kisara’s revenge. Enju had a simple way of thinking, but she never lost sight of what was important.

“Satomi, since that girl came to erase me because I was in the way, that means there will definitely be a second attempt.”

“Yeah.”

“The Lady Seitenshi is someone who will be necessary to Tokyo Area in the future. I know that you don’t like politicians, but you need to bear it and set your personal opinions aside for now.”

“I know.”

“Imagine, Satomi. In our current situation, with the fourth Seitenshi still

unborn, if the Lady Seitenshi were assassinated, the resulting political vacuum would throw Tokyo Area into confusion. The fate of Tokyo Area rests in your hands. You cannot fail.”

At that moment, all the lights in the room turned off, and the room was wrapped in darkness. It was time for lights out.

Kisara adjusted her posture and brushed back her hair with the moon behind her. “I order you as president of the Tendo Civil Security Agency. Eliminate the sniper targeting the Lady Seitenshi and carry out justice!”

Rentaro closed his eyes, put his hand to his chest, and asked his conscience. “I *will* stop her. I will be the one to stop her.”

6

“For such a thing to happen…”

They were inside the car. The Seitenshi sat elegantly with her hands on her lap, hiding her face. “I’m sorry. I had good intentions when I asked you to take on this job, but I didn’t think it would come to this.”

“You do not have to worry about that! When we were offered the job, Kisara said she was so happy, it was like it rained on her drought.” That was Enju. It was a great response—if only she had said “welcome rain in a drought” instead of “it rained on her drought.”

Rentaro leaned his back deeply into the all-leather seats and followed suit. “It’s just like Enju said. We looked at the risks properly and are getting paid to do our job, so it’s nothing you need to worry about. The insurance looks like it’ll cover the building, too. The only thing is that Yasuwaki thinks I’m secretly communicating with the culprit, so it makes it harder to do my job.”

“He thinks you’re secretly communicating with the culprit?” The Seitenshi responded with a smile, and Rentaro had to keep his mouth shut. He wasn’t secretly communicating with her, but he knew her. But if he said that, what kind of face would the country’s leader make?

Today's second unofficial conference would be at a restaurant for a change of scenery, and it would start at eight p.m. and was scheduled to continue late into the night.

Rentaro checked the time. It was currently seven thirty p.m.

Thinking of how the last conference went, it was hard to imagine that this conference would bear much fruit, but that was beyond the jurisdiction of a guard, and not something he had a say in.

"Rentaro, do you think this will go well?" Enju asked.

Looking at Enju's eyes filled with a mix of expectation and anxiety, he checked that the decoy limousine was driving in front of them and finally turned his head back around to look inside the car. "I wonder," he replied.

The van they borrowed from the staff at the Seitenshi's palace had a worn-out suspension or something that made it shake terribly, and it was no comparison to the comfort of riding in a limousine, but the Seitenshi sat quietly and expressed no discomfort.

It was Rentaro who suggested switching cars at the last minute. Even that was sudden and only in the presence of the Seitenshi's trusted personal aides. At first, the aides just stared at him in shock. Apparently, just the suggestion for a holy personage such as the Seitenshi to ride in a normal car was hard for them to believe. However, a clever scheme that followed the rules of common sense was not a clever scheme. The more absurd the idea, the more likely it would be to fool Tina.

The guard plan leak last time meant that it would make sense to assume that there was a traitor in the Seitenshi's palace. If the traitor was part of the Seitenshi's personal guards who wrote the guard plan, then it would be annoying, but if the traitor wasn't, then they would be arrested sooner or later. There was already an internal investigation team that had started work on bringing to light who was leaking information. If they had caught the culprit, Rentaro would be able to relax a little more with his guarding, though.

There, Rentaro remembered the face of someone he disliked and hit his knee with a fist. "Sougen Saitake… I'm sure he's the culprit."

The Seitenshi's head twitched, and she looked at him with a sad expression. "Satomi, that's…"

"I know. I don't have any evidence yet. But when I think about who has the most to benefit from your death, he's the only person who comes to mind. Why is he sneaking around coming unofficially to Tokyo Area, anyway? That's pretty suspicious by itself, and then you were attacked on your way back from that meeting. And there's one more thing that's suspicious."

Rentaro stopped talking for a second and looked into the Seitenshi's eyes. "Lady Seitenshi, all your personal aides are scum. All they did was lay blame on others for leaking the plan, but they didn't even try working out a plan to prevent anything from happening. In the first place, why didn't they talk about who ordered the assassination? It wouldn't be hard to figure out if you just thought about it a little. But if they really expose Saitake as the leader behind the scenes, then one wrong step could lead to an outbreak of war between areas. Those guys are afraid to even think about it."

The driver, who realized that the conversation was taking a turn for the worse, started to fidget in the driver's seat.

The Seitenshi kept her eyes closed for a while. However, she eventually opened her eyes quietly and looked at Rentaro. "Satomi, I will keep what you said in mind, but only to myself. Please do not talk about it to anyone else."

Rentaro understood there was more to it than she said and reflexively started to stand up, but the Seitenshi shook her head slowly. "I am still the ruler of this nation. I cannot cancel a conference without evidence. Satomi, this is something that cannot be helped."

"You'll be killed!"

"If that is the fate chosen for me by the heavens, then there is nothing I can do. I will follow the god inside of me."

Rentaro suddenly felt a red-hot sensation, and before he knew it, he had grabbed the Seitenshi's collar and raised a fist overhead.

"Rentaro!" Enju hurriedly tried to intervene, but Rentaro just barely managed to grit his teeth with his fist trembling.

The Seitenshi just let it happen to her and quietly looked into Rentaro's eyes.

He squeezed his eyes shut. Rentaro didn't know how long he stayed like that, but he thrust the Seitenshi away and sat down in ill humor. Why were all the women around him idiots? There was a limit to how mentally strong one could be. It was hard not to be envious. "I will protect you. I did not take on the job of guarding you just to have you killed before my eyes."

"Thank you, Satomi."

Before long, the van arrived at the first-class restaurant, Utoro. It was on a large plot of land, and the outer wall was very high. The guard unit that had arrived earlier to investigate and disinfect the inside of the restaurant guided the van to a stop next to the restaurant.

Rentaro pulled the sliding door open and stretched a hand out to the Seitenshi. "Now, let us go, princess."

"I'm not a princes—," the Seitenshi started to say reflexively, but then bashfully looked down and quietly took Rentaro's proffered hand.

Exiting the car and exposing his body to the slightly cool air outside, Rentaro looked at the entrance of the restaurant and scowled.

An angry Yasuwaki had come out to meet them, looking like trouble. "Rentaro Satomi! What is the meaning of this? Why is the Seitenshi riding in such a shabby car?"

"We changed the car. I decided that a limousine would be too dangerous."

"Why did you not tell me?!"

Rentaro glared at Yasuwaki silently. *Because I couldn't trust your abilities.*

Yasuwaki kept grinding his teeth. "Bastard…… A big-headed grandstander like you will destroy the whole team! You scumbag!"

Because the angry Yasuwaki had moved a hand to the sidearm on his hip, Rentaro also put his hand on the XD on his hip to stop Yasuwaki if necessary. In the middle of the tense atmosphere of the explosive situation, Enju also made her eyes red and pawed the ground with her shoes. It had turned into a bad situation.

Suddenly, there was a buzzing sound, and Rentaro twisted his head back and forth but did not find anything. *There it was again…* The sound was the same as the buzzing that he heard during the last sniping incident. What in the world was it…?

Those tense nerves played a part in allowing Rentaro to anticipate a glint on the roof of a large building in the corner of his field of vision. He wasn't mistaken in what he had seen. It was the same sniper muzzle fire as he had seen the other day.

As Rentaro yelled, he hurled himself against the Seitenshi to force down the upper part of her body. The next instant, there was a sharp pain in his body. Rentaro was sure he felt the hot tip of an antitank bullet graze his side.

A heartbeat later, the place became frenzied. A number of the guards who understood Rentaro's intention quickly became a shield.

Rentaro pushed the Seitenshi into the van, rapped on the driver's seat, and ordered, "Drive."

The limousine that was blocking the front and the van they had gotten into started moving at almost the same time.

Rentaro put a hand to his side and felt something slippery as blood stuck to his hand. Unconsciously, one cheek twitched. Even with this, they were lucky. If he had been hit straight on with a bullet designed to pierce through armored cars, a frail human such as himself would have died immediately.

A small trick like switching cars was not enough to fool that sniper, after all.

"Rentaro!" said Enju.

"Enju, don't worry about me! Keep watch behind us," said Rentaro.

The Seitenshi's face paled as she reached her hand out toward his wound, but Rentaro waved her away with just his hand. The danger wasn't over yet. They had to break away to a safe area as soon as possible.

At that moment, Enju, who had been observing the roofs of the buildings behind them, gave a yell. "A glint!"

At almost the same time, the sound of screaming breaks and a crash flew into

their ears. Ahead of them, the decoy limousine was fishtailing with a large hole in its roof.

Rentaro felt chills when he realized that the sniper had not missed, and the car tilted forward, softly scattering splinters of glass as it turned on its side. As it spun, it entered his field of vision, approaching with frightening speed. Then and there, he realized what Tina was intending, and gritted his teeth.

The driver of the van froze with his hands still gripping the steering wheel. Rentaro kicked up the steering wheel from the backseat. The tires screeched as the van slid sideways, narrowly avoiding the approaching limousine. Anticipating the driver returning to his senses, Rentaro leaned his body forward and yelled, “Go into the parking lot of that building, quick!”

The flustered driver turned the steering wheel hard to the left, and the inertia threw Rentaro hard onto the glass of the window. They rushed into the basement parking lot of the nearby building, scattering the shocked security guards.

The moment the van stopped, Rentaro and Enju jumped out and started running. They got out onto the street just in time to see the driver crawl out from the ruins of the limousine that was used as a decoy. Antifreeze and gasoline had spilled onto the street.

Rentaro’s mind was on the verge of panic. With this, the sniper had hit five out of five super-long-range shots, not missing a single one. Was this a coincidence, or…?

He tried to run toward the building Tina was sniping from, but he fell to his knees dizzily. His gunshot wound throbbed in pain.

Rentaro gritted his teeth and looked up at the giant building between the two tall buildings. But at this rate, he would let Tina get away again. What could he do?

Just then, something shook Rentaro’s arm hard. It was Enju. “Rentaro, I will go after the sniper!”

“Go after…? Will you make it?”

“If I’m by myself.”

Rentaro was surprised by Enju's response, which was accompanied by serious eyes and a hard nod. In other words, the injured Rentaro would be a burden.

Rentaro hesitated. Enju losing was unthinkable, but he also wanted to avoid a situation where Enju wounded or killed Tina. What in the world was he supposed to tell Enju?

"I will return, Rentaro!"

Feelings rising up from deep in his gut pierced through Rentaro, and before he knew it, he had grabbed Enju's arm. "Be careful. Make sure you come back."

At first, Enju opened her eyes wide, but then finally smiled wryly and said boldly, "You are such a worrywart, Rentaro. Who do you think I am? The sniper does not have Zone. It's fine."

"Zone?" Rentaro said.

"I'll be back shortly." Enju unleashed her power, turned her eyes bright red, and jumped.

The onlookers pointed at Enju and started screaming, wondering what was going on, but Enju ignored them and jumped to the top of the building closest to them, and then soon disappeared.

After a while, Rentaro looked in the direction Enju had gone off. For some reason, even after hearing Enju's words, his uneasiness didn't let up one bit.

"Satomi, are you all right? The ambulance will be here soon, so please don't worry."

He looked back. It was the Seitenshi, looking pale.

"Get back into the parking lot, now!" is what he opened his mouth instinctively to say, but his words were swallowed by empty space, and he looked down, staying silent. That wasn't what was occupying his mind anymore.

She was a little calmer and noticed the state Rentaro was in. “What’s the matter, Satomi?”

Rentaro hesitated, but before he knew it, he had told the Seitenshi about Tina. If he didn’t talk about it to someone, the uneasiness that had already risen up to the back of his throat would make him go crazy.

“Tina Sprout…?” After the Seitenshi heard what he had to say, instead of telling him what she thought, she repeated the name of the young sniper wonderingly, continuing as she quickly rushed back to the car.

Rentaro tilted his head questioningly at her mysterious words and actions, but those feelings were soon overwritten by different thoughts. Rentaro had a strong impulse to call Enju to make sure she was safe, but when he opened his address book, he gritted his teeth and stuck his cell phone back into his pocket.

Enju and Tina were sure to be in the middle of their fight right now. If he foolishly called her at a time like that, it would be a devastating state of affairs for Enju. If Enju won, there was no way she would not contact him. He had to wait until then.

He broke out in a cold sweat, and his vision lurched, forcing him to his knees. The dull pain was slowly but surely invading Rentaro’s body.

In his head, he remembered the training they had in the back of the dojo the other day. Enju had slipped past all of Rentaro’s rubber bullets in no time and was closing in on him. There was such a great difference in their strength that it could barely be called practice.

Enju had said she was bad against a barrage of bullets from a shotgun or machine gun, but she was strong against guns designed to shoot single bullets, like a handgun or sniper rifle. Sniper rifles were almost always used with optical scopes with high magnification used to enlarge the target.

This was something that was not that different in principle from the microscopes used in science or biology classes. Of course, with higher magnification, even though the target could be seen more clearly, moving just a little caused the target to leave the field of vision. There was no way a sniper could capture a girl who could move at superspeeds—a girl with the Rabbit

Factor inside her. Since this was night sniping, there was probably also some sort of infrared equipment being used, but either way, there was no way Enju would fall behind the other girl.

It'll be fine. Calm down. Rentaro chanted this over and over.

Thinking that about thirty minutes had passed already, he looked at his phone and realized that it had only been five minutes. It was irritating how slowly time was passing.

"Satomi!" Screaming, the Seitenshi came running toward him. "Get Enju back here right now!"

The girl who had been able to say it was her fate to be killed was in front of him right now looking pale, with her shoulders heaving as she panted.

"H-hey, what's the—"

"I used my authority to do an International Initiator inquiry into Tina Sprout's name. Her IP rank is 98. She's an owl Initiator and one of the enhanced NEXT soldiers. I saw her specs, and her numbers are terrifying. Enju will be killed!"

IP rank 98. Just those words echoed over and over in Rentaro's head. That was way above Kagetane Hiruko and his daughter. Rentaro recalled Tina's face and shook his head softly. There was no way.

Then, he suddenly regained his senses and dialed his phone as if hitting it, pressing it hard to his ear. As it rang a few times, he shut his eyes tight and prayed desperately that Enju was safe.

It rang about ten times, and then there was the sound of the phone being picked up. "Enju! Is that you, Enju?!" he called desperately. "Ahh, oh good, get back here right now. We're going to rethink our strategy."

There was no answer.

No, he could hear faint breathing from the other side.

"Enju, what's wrong? At least answer."

Rentaro listened dubiously, but there was no answer after all.

"Enju…? What's…the matter…? En…… Huh?"

Rentaro took the phone off his ear for a moment and stared at it fixedly.

“Is this……Tina……?”

There was a long silence.

That said everything.

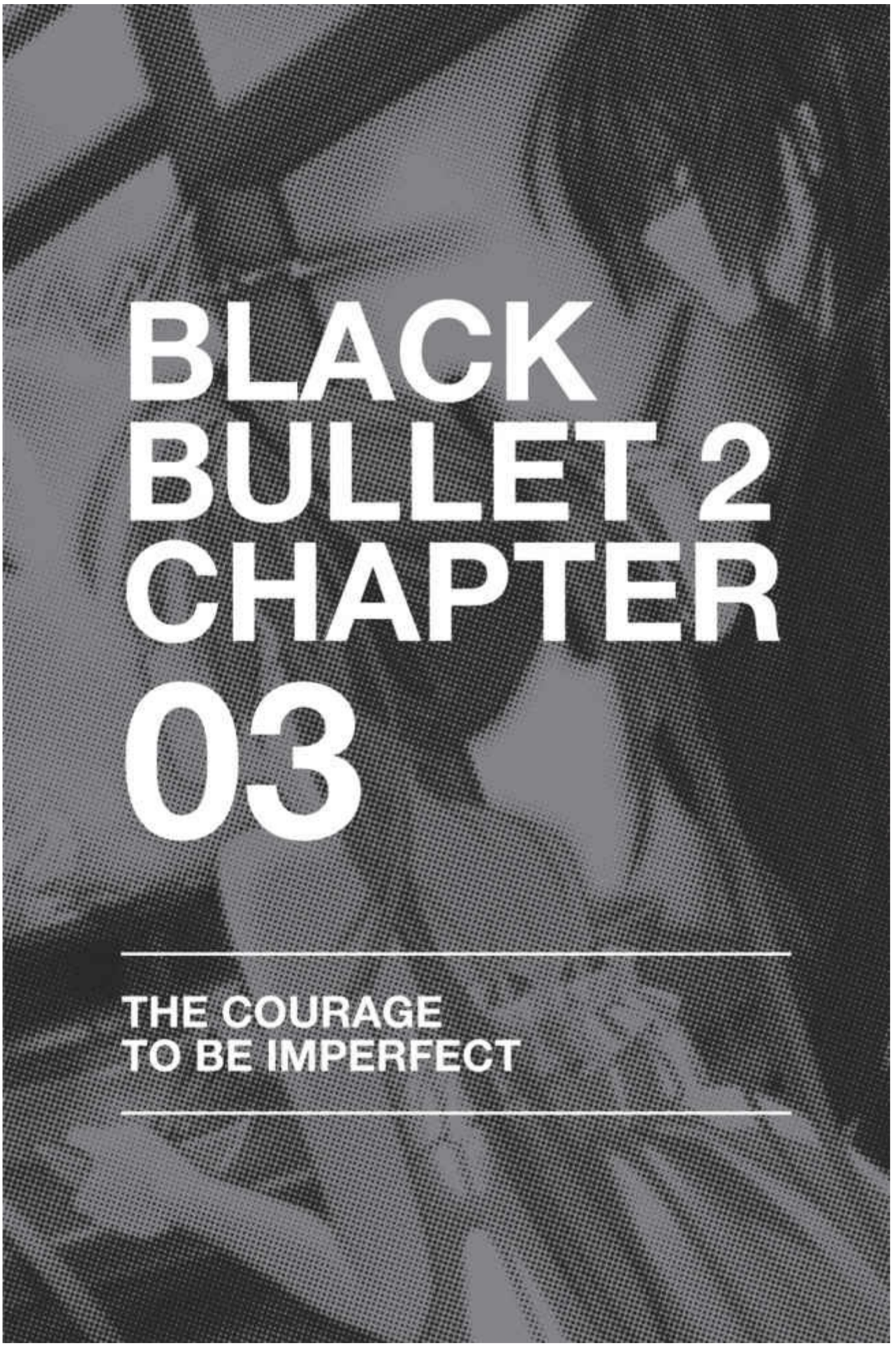
The cell phone Enju should have been holding was in Tina’s hands. Then, what had happened to its rightful owner? All sound disappeared from his ears, and his blood froze.

No. No, no… No…!

Suddenly, there was a click, and the dial tone rang.

The cell phone slipped out of his hands, ringing dryly as it bounced. The blood running out of his side spread slowly on the ground, soaking the phone. Rentaro fell to his knees, shaking his head from side to side without a sound.

Enju had been…killed?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THE COURAGE
TO BE IMPERFECT

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CHAPTER 03

THE COURAGE TO BE IMPERFECT

1

“Hey, you came, civsec. It’s kinda sudden, but I’ll have you look at the scene of the crime.” The square-jawed face of Inspector Shigetoku Tadashima of the First Investigation Division had a fleeing expression that looked like sympathy, but he tried to treat Rentaro as matter-of-factly as possible.

When Rentaro touched his own face softly with a pale hand, he felt dry skin and cracked lips. What kind of expression did he have on his face right now? Rentaro shook his heavy head and looked left and right. There were no window frames or anything, and the undressed concrete floor was riddled with bullet holes. Rentaro was on the sixth floor of a building under construction. Around him, crime scene inspectors and people from forensics came and went hurriedly.

Also jokingly called the homicide department, the First Investigation Division of the Metropolitan Police Department had long included all Gastrea incidents, which had a high probability of being criminal, in their operations. The work of the crime lab was also partially privatized, and things that required complicated calculations like analyzing the trajectory of a bullet were, after thoroughly preserving the evidence and ensuring confidentiality, entrusted to large corporations like Shiba Heavy Weapons.

Rentaro shook his head. What was he thinking?

He was putting off his thoughts, his mind secretly trying to desperately deny what he was about to see. Rentaro had seen a number of crime scenes with the

police as a civsec officer, but it was the first time his stomach felt so heavy. It was because the victim was possibly someone he knew very well.

His brain wouldn't function properly. The fact that he was standing here breathing seemed like something on the other side of the TV screen and felt strangely like he was watching someone else.

"Hey, are you all right, civsec?"

Someone shook Rentaro's shoulder, and he returned to himself with the pain of the wound in his side and shook Tadashima's hand off.

"I'm fine… Just, just show me the crime scene."

Tadashima looked at him questioningly but silently cleared the way for Rentaro. When they got to the back, the forensics people in blue jumpsuits noticed Rentaro and nodded uncomfortably.

When Rentaro finally stopped walking, he stared at the ground. On the concrete floor, there was a spot that had an especially concentrated number of bullet holes, and like stepping-stones, there were countless bloodstains that had small round chalk marks drawn around them.

Recently, there had been a number of days with record-breaking high temperatures, but today felt especially hot and humid, and Rentaro loosened his necktie.

"This is where the victim was shot."

"It's pretty intense," Rentaro was warned, and when he looked at the photo, he had to cover his mouth to hold back the nausea he felt.

"It's been hot recently, so the flies gather. That's why I said it was intense."

Rentaro swallowed the urge to vomit and looked once more at the bundled stack of photos, flipping through them. Most of the pictures were of pieces of flesh. The occasional pieces of white were probably bone fragments. Even though he was just looking at them, he felt like he could smell the choking stink of blood.

The last picture was that of a pink smartphone that had been stomped to pieces. His eyes weren't tricking him. It was Enju's.

Rentaro stood up and frowned, looking back and forth between the photos and the places marked by chalk circles. Enju Aihara was defeated by Tina Sprout here.

“Strangely, the victim was shot from four different places at the same time,” Tadashima said.

When Rentaro looked in the direction Tadashima pointed, he saw that Tadashima was referring to buildings in four directions on his right, left, in front of him, and diagonally to the right and above.

“And from the rooftop of each building, we found the ruins of heavy machine guns from three different places. I don’t know if it was to keep any evidence from being left behind, but the machine guns used were destroyed with plastic bombs and abandoned. They have been sent to Shiba Heavy Weapons for analysis, but what we know right now is that the serial numbers and identifying information of the guns have been scratched off, and that parts that are not normally used on machine guns were equipped.”

“Is Enju dead?” Rentaro absentmindedly raised just his gaze.

“I don’t know… Right now, they’re checking the DNA of the scattered victim and your Initiator.”

“It’s Enju. There’s no mistaking it. In the pictures, I saw scraps of Enju’s coat.”

“I see……” Even Tadashima had a gloomy look on his face as he looked down and finally looked around the crime scene. “Don’t despair yet. They’re saying that the bullets probably hit her in the gut, and there was no body at the crime scene. On top of that, all the bullets that they gathered were made of regular lead, not Varanium. Initiators won’t die if they aren’t shot directly in the heart or the brain, right?”

“Even if that were the case, this means Enju has been taken away by the enemy!” And the bullets that hit Enju were antitank rifle bullets. Like their name implied, these were extremely powerful bullets developed to pierce through the armor of a tank. Tanks had become stronger because of Chobham armor and the like, so antitank bullets were unable to bring tanks down anymore, but because they were such overkill when used against humans, their use was limited through war agreements. If shot at a human body, it would open a large hole on impact,

and even if the person managed to escape instant death or death from shock, they would still feel a writhing pain.

Imagining that much, Rentaro squeezed his eyes shut. Right now, at this instant, was Enju undergoing harsh interrogation or torture? There was no way a child could withstand severe torture. In addition to having all the information she had pulled out of her, Enju was probably already—

Rentaro's fist shook. *Why hadn't I noticed? Idiot, idiot, idiot!* Just as he was trying to anticipate the sniping and figure out a plan to deal with it, Tina also knew that someone was on her trail and had figured out a plan to deal with that.

And Enju had fallen straight into her trap.

How in the world did she defeat Enju? How did she get Enju, the natural enemy of snipers, with a sniper rifle?

In the first place, that Enju had been shot from four places at the same time was hard to understand. Assassinations were really only done by the best of the best, so there were probably two perpetrators, Tina and her promoter, but was that not the case?

No matter how hard he thought, he couldn't find the answer. The only thing he knew was that Tina boasted battle power far above what he had imagined.

Rentaro let out a shaky breath. The only thing left was a cold fear toward the professional killer named Tina. It was all his own fault for not being able to keep Enju back.

In the end, the Seitenshi's second conference was canceled. At this point, it was unclear whether or not there would be a third.

His head was heavy and felt like it was filled with lead. His brain wouldn't work more than this. Besides, in his innermost heart, he didn't care anymore. Everything had lost its meaning. Rentaro turned on his heel and left the crime scene, not listening to the unmoving Tadashima's voice.

Rentaro went home dragging his feet. When he arrived, he put his key into the keyhole and turned. Unexpectedly, air cooler than that from outside touched the back of his neck.

Rentaro stood stock-still in the entryway for a while. During the last terrorist attack, there had been the distressing incident of Enju running away from home, but compared to that, the situation this time was much worse.

It was painful staying at home, so Rentaro went outside. After walking for a while, he realized he forgot to lock the door to his apartment and stopped but decided he didn't care and continued walking. The sun was setting before his eyes, and it became dark.

He didn't know why, but Rentaro's feet headed toward the downtown area with a lot of people. Perhaps he was looking for the company of others. However, what Rentaro wanted wasn't there. Rentaro leaned against the guardrail of the pedestrian bridge and looked down on the town, but the dazzling lights were too bright and the happy laughter of the families was too loud and hurt his ears.

One feels loneliest in a crowd. This was exactly how he felt. He felt miserable, like his heart was about to be crushed.

Rentaro looked at one of the families. A child about Enju's age was jumping at the father's back.

Why am I not them?

Why are they not me?

Questions with no answers swirled inside his head. Rentaro went home as if running away and fell asleep embracing his despair.

The next day, Rentaro stayed home from school. He felt no will to leave his blankets. Though an eight-tatami-mat room was too small for two people to use, it was too big for one person.

When he turned on his cell phone, he had several texts from Kisara, Miori, and Sumire, but he didn't feel like looking at what was inside and left them.

He had a hard time falling back asleep, and he felt dazed. He had a sense of loss like there was a piece of him missing, but his heart was numb.

Waking up after sleeping for a number of hours, he was starting to have a hard time telling the difference between day and night. The day before, he had pulled

back the dark curtains and put masking tape over the windows and cracks, so the space Rentaro was in now was filled with darkness.

In his light slumber, Rentaro dreamed. The intercom rang, and when he went out front, Enju's grotesque corpse had been left there. Another time, it was a burned body curled up like a fetus, and then a body that had been strangled to death with rope marks on the neck. A corpse with the head cut off. A half-dismantled body.

All the Enjus were left in an unspeakable condition. "Why did you not come save me, Rentaro?" they asked.

Rentaro pushed his face into his pillow and writhed, trying desperately to make the delusions go away.

After another ten hours passed, he stopped seeing even the self-punishing destructive delusions that swirled in his head. His stomach had stopped telling him he was hungry. It had probably started consuming his own organs because it couldn't take it anymore.

He remembered what Sumire had once told him. When people live only on water, they will become skin and bones and die, but if people don't even drink water, they will die from acute starvation, dying before they use all the nutrients in their body, not giving their bodies the chance to become thin before death.

His consciousness became muddy, and various hallucinations came and went. Like throwing everything out of a toy chest, he was swallowed by the torrent of his thoughts as they flowed.

Then, Rentaro felt odd, and his shoulders shook. The next thing he knew, moisture was running down his cheeks. The tears had finally come.

If Enju was dead, then what was he supposed to do with himself from now on? If he was to take a step out of the house, should he go right? Should he go left?

What should he do? Should he just do nothing? Should he live? Should he die?

He didn't even know the answer to that anymore.

Enju, Enju, Enju, please come home. I miss you, Enju.

Suddenly, he started to lose consciousness. He was probably faint from not

eating. He didn't want to think about anything anymore.

There was a voice calling his name. He thought he was hearing things, but he wasn't. Outside the door, a spare key was thrust into the keyhole, and the door opened vigorously, making Rentaro squint his eyes at the brightness.

Kisara panted as she came in. With wet eyes and both hands on her mouth, she said, "Enju is… Enju is—"

Rentaro rushed into the hospital room with enough force to run something down. There was baby's breath in a flower vase, and the breeze coming in from the open window made the curtains flutter. In the middle of the hospital room, a girl was lying on top of the bulging bed. Her small chest went up and down, so he could tell she was breathing.

He wasn't imagining things.

Rentaro kneeled by the bed with an expression of ecstasy on his face, and he prayed, putting both elbows on the bed and holding Enju's hand.

O God, God, God! Without words, he prayed thanks that Enju was safe.

Suddenly, Kisara hugged him tightly from behind, and he smelled a sweet fragrance. "You're so emaciated… Your injury isn't fully healed yet, either, idiot… Why do you treat yourself so badly? If you and Enju are both gone, then what am I supposed to do…?" The end of her sentence half-disappeared in her tears.

Rentaro put the palm of his hand on top of the palm of Kisara's hand and closed his eyes. "Sorry, Kisara. I'm really sorry…"

Guiltily, Rentaro rolled up the hem of Enju's hospital gown and breathed a sigh of relief. Enju's stomach was the pretty skin color of a normal child's stomach, and the gunshot wounds had healed over nicely without even leaving a scar.

"Is it all over, then…?" he said.

The assassin had failed once and faced danger to try again. Surely there would be no third time…

Kisara looked up at Rentaro with eyes shaking with uneasiness. "Satomi, I sent you a text. Did you see it? The date of the Seitenshi's third unofficial conference was set yesterday."

“When?! What’s the date and time of the conference?”

“Tomorrow night, at eight o’clock…”

“Tomorrow…”

Just then, there was the sound of a door opening. Looking back, Rentaro saw a doctor and nurse come into the room. He got up with a start to press them with questions. “Is Enju all right? Will there be any aftereffects? Where did they find her? I want to talk to her. Is it okay to wake her up?”

The doctor looked at the nurse and replied with a troubled face, “We will know for sure once she wakes up, but we probably do not have to worry about aftereffects. However, right now, it would be best not to force her to wake up. Many times the lethal amount of anesthetic was intravenously injected into her before she was left in a room in an abandoned building where the police received a report and took her into their care. The only reason she is still alive is that she has the Gastrea virus in her.”

Many times the lethal amount of anesthetic…?

The doctor and nurse exchanged looks, as if the next part was hard to say. “There is one thing we must tell you, Satomi. About your Initiator’s body’s corrosion rate… The process involved to heal the large wound from this time made it rise slightly.”

Rentaro made a fist, grinding his teeth and looking down. *It’s my fault*, he thought. Finally, biting his bottom lip with regret, he lifted his face. “How long before Enju wakes up…?”

“I’d like to keep an eye on her for two days.”

“Two days…”

Something was strange.

As Rentaro tried to find the source of his discomfort, he pressed his temple, but suddenly his vision blinked, and his body swayed. The next thing he knew, Kisara was holding him up. Now that he thought about it, he was on the verge of death himself. Since he had remembered, he couldn’t figure out how he had been standing up. He felt languid and exhausted, attacked by the pain of his wound, and his vision faded into darkness.

Rentaro sipped the rice gruel, but when he forced the porridge into his mouth, his stomach was surprised and started contracting. He wanted to recover as soon as possible, so he forced the food down through the nausea, consuming half of the hospital food in several sittings, and had them give him more saline in his IV drip.

Holding Enju, he dozed off next to her, and when he woke up, he was feeling much better.

The doctor said, “You need to be hospitalized, too,” but Rentaro smiled bitterly and left.

Then, Kisara held her nose and pointed out, “You stink! Satomi, you have terrible BO!” So on his way home to pick up a change of clothes, he stopped by the public bath to wash his hair and wipe down his body.

When he got out of the bath, he rewrapped the bandages over his recovery

patch in the changing room and lightly touched the wound in his side. It still throbbed painfully, but he decided he could bear it.

Rentaro put his hands on the large vanity and stared at himself. His cheeks were hollow, his lips were cracked and dry, and his hair had lost some of its shine. However, his mind was working again, and the vague discomfort he felt earlier finally became clear.

The doctor had said Enju had many times the lethal amount of anesthetic injected into her, but Rentaro wondered if it really was chance that kept her from dying from the excess anesthetic.

It would have been easy to kill Enju. Her head or heart just had to be destroyed. However, Tina had not done that. Why not?

In the first place, using injection as her method of choice was strange. When giving an injection to one of the Cursed Children, who had threatening powers of regeneration, one usually used a pressure-style injection that didn't require a needle, or a Varanium needle that prevented the wound from healing itself. These were the two main types. Even if a regular needle was used, the moment the needle pierced the skin, regeneration would begin, so the needle could break, get stuck to the skin, or something else bad could happen.

After checking Enju's arm, Rentaro saw needle marks. This was the second type—in other words, it was evidence that a Varanium needle had been used.

Why would Tina go through all this trouble?

Rentaro kept staring at the mirror.

Just then, the ruins of the police car thought to have been destroyed by one of the Cursed Children crossed the back of his mind. The police car had been thoroughly destroyed, but the police officer had miraculously survived.

It was similar—even though one whole wall around Enju had been covered with bullet holes from a heavy machine gun, Enju's life had been spared.

Rentaro thought about it carefully one move at a time.

Tina was definitely trying to kill the Seitenshi and Kisara. The person who hired Tina, or her Promoter, had probably told her to kill them by name directly.

However, it was possible that Tina was trying her best not to kill people not on the list to be assassinated. That was why Enju and that police officer did not die. Was that too big a leap to make?

Of course, this act was contrary to the opinion of the person who hired her and her Promoter. It didn't make sense for those twisted enough to order an assassination to have any hesitation about getting rid of the witnesses.

Pressing forward with that line of thinking, Rentaro put his chin in his hand. Tina wasn't a bad person at heart. Was it his desire to believe this that was skewing reality?

Just then, he saw Tina's face in his mind, smiling softly and eating *takoyaki* in the sunny park, and shook his head hard.

Damn it. What am I thinking? She's a professional killer.

In his head, he turned over what the doctor said about it taking two days before Enju would wake up. There was something this assassin didn't want Enju to wake up and say so badly that she put Enju to sleep.

Tina Sprout was probably planning on finishing all the assassinations and leaving Tokyo Area in the next two days. There was hardly any time left.

What will you do, Rentaro Satomi?

2

Irritated at the unanswered questions, Rentaro changed and left the bathhouse. On his way back to the hospital, Rentaro stopped by a vending machine under a humid-smelling overpass and pushed in some coins, pushing the button consecutively several times. Twisting off the cap of the carbonated drink the machine spit out, he gulped it down and emptied the plastic bottle in a second.

Perhaps because he was distracted, he didn't notice he was being followed until he heard his name.

"Hey, Rentaro Satomi."

Rentaro looked back with a sinking feeling. What he saw was Yasuwaki and the other Seitenshi personal guards grinning, riding in a black Benz.

“What do you want…?” Rentaro slammed his plastic bottle into the trash can with unconcealed displeasure and started walking. The car was going so slowly to keep pace with Rentaro that it made him angry.

“The third conference has been decided.”

“I know.” Rentaro said it without looking at Yasuwaki, so Yasuwaki pulled out a thin bundle of papers and started fanning himself with it.

Yasuwaki laughed. “However, you can’t guard her anymore. Why? Because your last ray of hope, your Initiator, was beaten by the sniper and sent to the hospital, right? That’s unfortunate. That means the new guard plan is useless to you, of course.”

The guard plan for the third conference?

“Give me that!” Rentaro stole the papers out of Yasuwaki’s hands and leafed through them quickly, ignoring the enraged Yasuwaki as he burned the escort route into his memory.

Suddenly, a hand stretched out from behind him and stole the papers back. Crushing the papers as he got out of the car, Yasuwaki looked at Rentaro with eyes frozen with hatred. “Bastard… You aren’t planning on stepping down from guarding the Seitenshi?”

Those words surprised Rentaro. Why did he look at the guard plan? Was he planning on continuing this job? Even after going through all that?

Kisara had been half-killed, Rentaro suffered a serious injury, and Enju was in a state of unconsciousness. In addition, the enemy was an unprecedented IP rank 98. To put it bluntly, she was way beyond the capacity of the Tendo Civil Security Agency. The money was not worth their lives, and in this case, the risks had already far outweighed the returns. The Seitenshi had likely promised a large sum in compensation, but even so, if the enemy was ranked 98, even ten times that wouldn’t be worth it.

Of course, this was where they should return the advance and wash their hands of the case. The Seitenshi would probably be sad, but she would not stop

them. They would walk away from the job on good terms. Yasuwaki would also stop holding strange grudges against him. Enju would wake up eventually. The Tendo Civil Security Agency would continue on. It would be wonderful.

Rentaro shook his head softly.

That was the one thing he couldn't do.

What would happen if he were to step down from this job right now? It was obvious. That prideful-but-honorable leader of the nation would surely be destroyed. Even if they were to hire a standin civsec officer other than himself, there was no way they would be able to stop the peerless Initiator with her super-precise, long-range shooting abilities.

Rentaro sighed as he lifted his face and looked at Yasuwaki straight on. "I will continue with the job. I will protect Lady Seitenshi."

"Stop messing around, asshole! It all, *all* got messed up after you came!"

Seeing Yasuwaki's arm move toward his holster, Rentaro's right hand also moved at the same time. The next instant, Yasuwaki's Luger P.08 gun and Rentaro's XD gun were pointed at their opponents' brows.

The other members of the personal guard who were riding in the Benz jumped out in a flurry. At the same time, a train came by on the overpass, and there was a shrill sound as it passed.

Yasuwaki's persistent eyes blazed brightly as they looked at Rentaro. "Rentaro Satomi, do you really like being by Lady Seitenshi's side that much?"

"Don't make me the same as you. More importantly, are you planning on proceeding with this plan? The information's gonna get leaked again."

"You're the one leaking the information, bastard!"

"Bullshit! Did the internal investigation of the Seitenshi's palace come up with any information about the person who leaked the information?"

"The list has been narrowed down quite a bit, thanks to the efforts of the internal investigation team. Your name is at the top of the list, of course."

"Then give everyone on that list a fake copy of the guard plan."

Yasuwaki's hand holding the gun shook with anger, and the hand on the trigger was white as snow. "*Don't*, tell *me*, what to *do*……!"

Just before the sound of Yasuwaki's gunshot, Rentaro brushed Yasuwaki's arm away and swept his feet out from under him. After he pushed Yasuwaki down with his knee, Yasuwaki made the anguished croak like that of a frog being squished.

"I'll tell you just one more time! Give everyone on that list a fake copy of the guard plan! I'll take care of the rest."

3

She slammed the desk with all her strength, and beakers and flasks jumped noisily.

"No! *Hell* no!" The queen of the basement, Sumire Muroto, was livid, with her lab coat trailing behind her as she paced inside the basement room.

Rentaro had a faint idea of what would happen, but this was a reaction way beyond what he had imagined. This was probably the first time he had ever seen Sumire so worked up.

Using her own authority, the Seitenshi had printed out information about Tina Sprout and her rank and given it to Rentaro. On that piece of paper, Tina's Promoter's name was also printed out.

Rentaro remembered hearing the name before.

"Ain! Have you fallen so far, Ain Rand?!" Sumire shouted.

Rentaro said, "Then this Ain Rand is that person you were talking about after all, Doc? Your—"

"Yeah, that's right. There's no mistaking it. Someone who was once called one of the Four Sages with me, as hard to believe as that is."

"W-wait a minute, Doc. Why are you so angry?"

"How can I *not* be angry about this? He's sold the last pride he had as a doctor

to the devil. Rentaro, how did you end up getting the surgery for the New Humanity Creation Project?”

“That was…” When Kisara’s parents were eaten by a stray Gastrea, and Rentaro protected her, it resulted in his right arm and leg and left eye being eaten. Near death, he was brought to Sumire’s lab.

“In other words, you had only two choices: undergo the surgery and live, or die,” said Sumire.

Rentaro lifted his face with a start, and Sumire nodded once before continuing. “Kagetane Hiruko was the same. He sustained a serious injury to his internal organs, and he was left with only two choices: undergo the surgery, or wait for death. The four of us, including Ain and me, swore one thing before establishing the mechanized soldier project in our respective countries: ‘We are doctors first and scientists second.’ Of course, that was because of the extremely low success rate of the surgeries, but more than that, we wanted to respect the wishes of the patient, and we did not want to forget our respect for human life. After hearing that, I’ll ask you this, Rentaro. Have you ever heard of one of the Cursed Children sustaining so grave an injury that she was near death?”

Rentaro shook his head. In exchange for having shackles on their lifespans called corrosion rates, the Cursed Children had overwhelming muscle strength, agility, regenerative ability, and they did not get any of the diseases or impairments of normal humans.

Like how Enju did not die even after being injected with a lethal amount of anesthetic, the Gastrea virus inside their bodies was extremely sensitive to dangers to its host’s life and rendered foreign objects nontoxic. In reality, Rentaro had never even seen Enju catch a cold.

In other words, it was unthinkable that they would ever be in a situation where they only had the choice between surgery and death.

“You get it already, right, Rentaro? Ain, that brute, broke his vow and brought healthy Children into his lab.”

Rentaro was astonished. How in the world did Rand perform surgery on the Children? It wasn’t something Rentaro could wrap his head around then and there, and he shook his head.

Rand would have had to use Varanium scalpels, forceps, and other surgical tools to open their bodies. Of course, since Varanium inhibited their regeneration, using it to injure the Initiators would mean their healing abilities would drop significantly, as well.

As a result, wouldn't the success rate be much lower than that of an ordinary person? Just how many dozens of Children disappeared into the operating room? No, how many hundreds?

Rentaro started to imagine the grotesque scene of Children's bodies being opened and had to put a hand to his mouth. After all this time, he understood that that small assassin was standing atop a large number of corpses.

"Rentaro, I have good news and bad news. The good news is that Ain Rand has pretty much no combat ability to speak of. I can guarantee that as someone who worked with him in the past. They are pair in name only, and he probably isn't more than the person giving commands regarding the assassinations. You don't have to worry about him coming out into the front lines."

"What's the bad news?" Rentaro asked.

"Tina Sprout's rank of 98 is something she is maintaining with her own combat ability and hers alone."

Rentaro was shocked. The IP ranks given by the IISO, or International Initiator Supervision Organization, were called "IP" as an abbreviation of Initiator and Promoter, and they were based on their battle results among other things, calculated based on the combined total of the Initiator's and Promoter's combat abilities. If Rand did not fight, then Tina's rank of 98 was calculated solely based on her own combat ability.

Was something that ridiculous even possible?

"Rentaro, that Initiator named Tina hit a moving target five out of five times from a great distance away, is that correct?" Sumire asked.

"Yeah, that's right," said Rentaro.

"If that's the case, then I have an idea about the trick the enemy's using to pull off that precision sniping."

“Really?”

Sumire nodded once and pushed through piles of old documents on her desk to find an old-style terabyte disc, which she inserted into her computer. When she pointed the remote control at the wall to operate it, a screen slid down and connected wirelessly to the projector. Soon, there was a large image projected onto the screen.

Rentaro leaned forward, wondering what was about to start, but at first, he just saw a cold blue background with the words TEST 1 on the screen. The next instant, in a space as wide as a bowling alley, a stocky bald man who was blindfolded appeared on the screen. The picture was crude, and there was no music. It had been made in a very businesslike way.

Rentaro frowned. What was this?

The video changed to a shot filmed from behind the man’s back. That was when Rentaro first noticed the man had a handgun in his right hand, and that there were three shooting targets inside the room. It looked like he was going to shoot them blindfolded.

Rentaro didn’t dare blink in case he missed something. However, what happened the next instant completely surpassed what Rentaro was expecting.

From his navy blue jacket, the man pulled out three round, fist-size black Bits and threw them toward the ground. However, the Bits didn’t fall to the ground, but floated up and started circling over the man’s head without a sound. Finally, the man lifted his arm high and then brought his arm down, as if to say, “Go.”

In a moment, the plasma engines at the bottoms of the Bits ignited. They flew toward the targets with amazing speed. The blindfolded man lifted his right arm and fired three shots from his gun. The picture changed. The next shot was an enlarged shot to prove that the three gunshots went through the middle of each of the three targets.

Rentaro took a step back in shock. His brain couldn’t understand what he was seeing. What was this? Something like this shouldn’t be possible. This had to be some sort of special effect. If not, it was a problem. He turned back with imploring eyes, but Sumire’s stern look and crossed arms rejected that possibility completely.

“Thought-drive interface, a Shenfield. That is probably the trump card Ain has up his sleeve. Do you know what a BMI is?”

“Brain machine interface?”

“That’s right. The BMI is actually not something new in research. For patients whose arms and legs are paralyzed to control a computer cursor with only their thoughts when their brains are connected to electrodes is something that has been possible for over twenty years.

“The man in the video used an advanced version of that. With a neurochip implanted in his brain, he can control a number of devices with just his thoughts. Those Bits are like scouts. They have precise observation instruments installed, and they send information about the location of the target, including its coordinates, temperature, humidity, angle, and wind speed, wirelessly to the brain of the operator. That’s why that man could shoot through the targets blindfolded. Of course, the surgery the sniper underwent was not just for this.

“I have heard that shaking hands are also a great enemy to snipers. It is likely that a metal balancer was implanted in the body to completely shut down any movement to the hand from heartbeats or breathing. Putting something like that in is a piece of cake for someone like me or Ain. Rentaro, do you understand what this means?”

There was no way he could understand.

By making full use of this weapon, the Shenfield, the sniper could scout the enemy’s movements while concealed. That was a great advantage when sniping a human, and it probably made possible the amazing feat of hitting five consecutive targets a kilometer away.

But there, Rentaro had a question. If that was the case, that meant that last time, and the time before, when they were on guard, these black Bits were observing Rentaro and the others from somewhere?

Just then, something seemed to pull at his thoughts. When he realized what it was, he lifted his face and jumped over to Sumire’s computer. Ignoring the flustered Sumire, he turned the volume up to max and replayed the video from the beginning, staring at the screen.

The man fished the fist-size Bits out of his jacket, and the Bits floated and started circling. At that moment, Rentaro could definitely hear something that sounded like the buzzing of an insect, and his eyes opened wide.

This was it. There was no mistaking it. The strange sound he had heard during the last sniping and the sniping before that was this. Rentaro felt chills and rubbed his arms. Those Bits had been flying near Rentaro both times after all.

And Tina was an Initiator with the Owl Factor. She probably already had eyes that could see well at night, and her vision was probably much better than that of the average person. It was possible that Tina didn't even use the optical scope essential for a sniper rifle when she operated hers.

The reason she was so tired when he saw her during the day was that she had a nocturnal animal factor in her body. There was no mistaking it. Everything made sense now, and all the mysteries were cleared up at once.

Rentaro finally understood. This was the ability of Tina Sprout, the superstrong Initiator specialized for sniping people at night.

"Research like this was being done almost ten years ago…?" he asked.

"I was also surprised when I heard about the sniper from you," said Sumire. "Because I thought Shenfield was an obvious failure."

Rentaro looked at Sumire, surprised. "What do you mean?"

Sumire frowned. "I mean what I said. This was a failure. The neurochip implanted in the brain gave off a large amount of heat and burned the inside of the subject's brain. The man in the video also died in the end. Ain, you bastard, don't tell me you completed Shenfield…"

"Doc, how many Bits can be manipulated at once?"

"Three. More than that and the brain is overloaded and the operator can't handle it."

Three… Rentaro crossed his arms and rested his chin on his hand, stroking his chin in thought.

Sumire sat down in a chair somewhere and narrowed her eyes dangerously. "Rentaro, what are you thinking about?"

“How to beat Tina,” said Rentaro.

“It’s impossible. Stop it.”

“Why?”

“Those with ranks under a hundred have sold their souls to the devil. It’s no exaggeration to call them monsters. It’s too early for you to overtake the hundreds.”

“Doc, that’s stupid! You didn’t say anything during the Kagetane Hiruko terrorist incident!”

“Of course not.” Sumire put her elbow on the armrest and put her chin in her hand, sighing. “During that incident, all the lives in Tokyo Area could have been lost. This time, it’s different. It might sound bad, but there would only be one life lost.”

“It’s not a matter of number!”

“It *is* a matter of number. It’s true that the Lady Seitenshi’s life is hard to replace with another, but even so, it’s not something that can be compared to all the lives of Tokyo Area.” Seeing Rentaro hesitate, Sumire tried to talk to him in a way he could understand.

“Rentaro, let’s do a simple calculation that even you can understand. Let’s assume that my New Humanity Creation Project and Ain’s NEXT have the same amount of hidden power. If we subtract the abilities of a mechanized soldier from you and that assassin, what do we have left? The unsurpassable wall between a human and an Initiator. Can a human beat a gorilla? Think about it carefully. Rentaro, just stay on the sidelines this time. There’s no need for you to take any more risks than you already have.”

Rentaro ground his teeth as he made a shaking fist. “Still, I…”

“Rentaro, science can make the impossible possible, but it’s not perfect. Science is the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge that humans ate that became the original sin, and we humans are descended from Cain, who was the first to stain his hands with murder. I am a doctor as well as a scientist, and I am proud of that, but I think scientists are the most sinful humans.

“Even I had a period when I thought to fill the world with peace and happiness with a bright flame. However, when my lover was killed during the Gastrea War, I fell easily to the path of demons. I didn’t know that humans could hate something so deeply. And the result of that was that I killed many patients to create an enhanced soldier like you. Rentaro, do you know why Varanium is black?”

“No…”

“My loathing has *stained* it black.”

Rentaro shook his head. “That’s not scientific.”

“But I believe it even now. And I sent you all into the world with the intent to slaughter and massacre. However, you alone I raised in a completely different way. Outwardly, your tone is sulky, but you are straightforward. That was when I realized it—My soul had been saved by your growth. When I had cried out after losing everything I had in the world, I was still connected to the world through your existence. When I hold the banked fire of that shining passion from that time, it is very warm. If you die, I will return to the darkness. Rentaro, don’t take the light away from me.”

“Doc…”

“Rentaro, what is happiness, anyway? I’m sure even you know that it’s not to be rich. If wealth and authority were the conditions for happiness, a multimillionaire wouldn’t take a gun and shoot out his own medulla oblongata. Rentaro, I believe that you are someone who knows your own happiness. And a person’s worth is decided once their coffin is closed. It’s not like you can’t see Enju and Kisara crying if you die, right? I would be sad, too, and regretful. Rentaro, you have it good. There’s no reason for you to speed up your death.”

Rentaro shook his head. “You’re a coward, Doc. You’re too good at persuading other people.”

Sumire smiled suddenly. “Yeah, it’s something I’m secretly proud of. Then—”

“No, even so, I have to go.”

“Wha—?” Sumire stood up as she braced herself, and yelled in a voice filled with anger. “What are you, a child?!”

“Then is giving up what it means to be an adult? Let me tell you, Doc. You’re wrong!” Rentaro stretched his right arm straight out and made a fist. “I want to prove it. I want to prove that this arm I got from you is to save people!

“Doc, I once saw hell. Ten years ago, on that day, mankind was eaten by Gastrea, devoured, torn to pieces, and if you climbed a small hill and looked around, the sky was burning no matter where you looked. It was a scene I’ll never forget. I kept trying not to remember it, trying not to think about it. But I can’t do that.

“Even if I am at the heights of happiness with Kisara in my left arm and Enju in my right, I’m sure I would keep remembering that hell and agonize over it. In order for me to put an end to that nightmare of despair, all I can do is to protect the Lady Seitenshi, defeat Tina, raise my rank, and bring to light the mysteries of this world. I can’t run away…!”

Rentaro fell silent and turned around, walking forward.

“Where will you go?” Sumire asked.

“Forward. Doc, I’m going.”

“You’re going to be killed… There’s no doubt about it. You will be killed! Hey!”

Rentaro didn’t stop his feet anymore as he left the basement room behind him. Sumire’s cries of “You will be killed!” echoed through the basement, following Rentaro until he left the university.

It was night outside. The cold air on his skin cleared his head.

Rentaro pushed buttons on his cell phone and when the person on the other line picked up after a few rings, Rentaro said, “The enemy can hit a target a kilometer away a hundred percent of the time with a sniper rifle. I can’t win the way I am now. If you know of some way to deal with an enemy like this, tell me!”

The person on the other line was silent for a moment.

Rentaro held his breath, shutting his eyes tightly in prayer as he waited.

Finally—

“Well, it’s not like I *don’t* have anything.” On the other end of the line, the daughter of the CEO of Shiba Heavy Weapons, Miori Shiba, laughed

bewitchingly.

4

“Motion Reality Prism Battle Simulator Version 10.0 activated. Data card reading completed. Welcome back, Rentaro Satomi.”

A synthetic female voice read his name smoothly, and the words HELLO, WORLD appeared in the space about a meter in front of him. Alice and the White Rabbit holding a watch from *Alice in Wonderland* started chasing each other around the words.

It was probably just the programmer having fun, but the issue was the level at which this was reproduced. Both the blond girl in the apron and dress and the rabbit with his nose twitching looked like the real thing. Rentaro got close to them and leaned over, stretching his hand out slowly, but right before he could touch them, they disappeared.

Rentaro was surprised and stood up, lifting his face. He was in a white room. A really big one. It was empty inside, and it was swept so clean that there wasn’t a speck of dust, but the light shining from far above filled the white room with a diffuse light that made it so bright, he had to squint.

“How is it, Satomi dear?” asked Miori.

Rentaro said, “I can’t tell my right from left or front from back in this space, as usual. My brain is starting to hurt.”

As Rentaro gave noncommittal grunts to Miori’s voice over the headset, he looked around him. It was the fifth floor of the basement of the Shiba Heavy Weapons building. Rentaro was inside a space called the VR Special Training Room, a gigantic cube about a kilometer around.

The inside of the room was made completely of a special rubber that allowed one to use anything from real bullets to different types of explosives. It was one of the few advanced virtual combat training facilities in the world. It was often used by the self-defense force and special police, civsec officers, and even rich hobbyists, and apparently, it was booked up a year in advance, but Rentaro was

able to use it as a special favor from Miori.

Living in a shabby eight-tatami-mat apartment, Rentaro sometimes forgot that this was the year 2031, but seeing such futuristic equipment, he remembered.

“Miori, sorry to jump right into it, but please start now,” he said.

“Oh my, Satomi dear, you’re so impatient.”

As he started to retort back, “Why do you always have to make everything sound so perverted?” the scenery around him twisted.

The next thing he knew, Rentaro was abandoned in a desert. Twisting his neck, he could see the sun shining furiously in the middle of the sky, and hot wind and sand hit his body, making him damp and sweaty.

Astonished, Rentaro went to the top of the sand dune in front of him and looked around. Under the clear blue sky was desert as far as he could see. Rentaro was bewildered. His body was definitely in that white room. This room was just a virtual reality. It was not as if he had been transported to an actual desert by a warp from a science fiction movie.

Even though he knew the sweaty temperatures and wind were created by an air-conditioning unit, he couldn’t tell what this hill he was standing on was.

He thought the ground was made of some kind of turgor pressure material that was making instantaneous indentations, but then when he saw the dilapidated pillbox shelter in the distance, he wasn’t sure what was going on again. It wasn’t possible to create such a complicated building out of turgor pressure material.

“Miori, I think this every time, but what principles are at work here?” Rentaro asked.

“It’s a bottom-down system for the 3DCG and a top-down system for the reality capture combined with some other stuff. In other words, it’s a business secret,” she replied teasingly.

When Rentaro scooped up the sand on the ground, the hot sand spilled from between his fingers. It was definitely real—at least, that’s how it felt to him.

“Satomi dear, what do you want to do with the pain level?”

“Set it to max. If not, it won’t be training. Also, give me another of the XD guns that I use.”

Just then, almost ten holodisplay panels popped up in front of him. They were clauses regarding life endangerment saying basically, “We take no responsibility if you die.” Rentaro pushed the AGREE button without really reading them, and the windows closed.

Rentaro put his left hand in the air. A moment later, he caught the XD gun that rained down from the sky.

“Now, let’s get started. I’m looking forward to seeing you get serious, Satomi dear.”

“About that, Miori. For the simulator, just release my left eye. I can’t refill the cartridges in my right arm and leg, so I want to save those for when I fight Tina.”

After mollifying Miori by promising to go all out for her sometime, Rentaro pulled his own XD gun from his waist and waited with both guns out.

A countdown like one from an old movie appeared in front of his eyes—*10, 9, 8*—flickering inside the black circle surrounding it. He crossed his arms in front of his chest and closed his eyes quietly as he heightened his concentration by paying attention to his breathing.

“Mission start!” the synthesized voice said, and with the sound of a fierce wind on the battlefield, he started hearing the rolling words of a foreign language that sounded Middle Eastern. There must have been terrorist-type enemies positioned in the battlefield.

Rentaro quietly opened his eyes wide.

Artificial eye, activate.

The nano-core processor made using graphene transistors activated and started operating. Geometric patterns emerged on the spinning iris of his eye. His field of vision expanded and the colors became brighter.

Slowly, he inhaled, then exhaled. “Let the battle begin. I will now eliminate the enemy.”

“No way… What is this……?”

Watching on a monitor in another room, Miori Shiba was so shocked, she couldn't speak. The name of the stage Rentaro was in was *Impossible.*

Thirty enemies consisting of militiamen in turbans were positioned in this impenetrable stage. Immediately after it started, the militiamen attacked with assault rifle cross fire, so there hadn't been a single person who had cleared this stage before. The other day, the top ten members of Japan's Special Assault Team attempted this stage as a team, and they were all kicked out after being judged DEAD.

Miori thought it would be satisfactory if Rentaro took even one of the enemy with him and threw him in this stage half-maliciously. However—

Miori's face was almost touching the monitor. Her gaze was glued to the young man in the monitor wearing a suitlike uniform.

Rentaro Satomi had the strength of a demon.

Immediately after the battle began, Rentaro ran down the slope of the sand dune with fierce momentum. Sand pillars rose from the gunfire around his feet like explosions. Not even bothering to hide in the shadows, Rentaro charged into the enemy camp.

As he ran, he fired warning shots from his two guns. Slipping through the gunshots of the militia hiding behind a wall of sandbags, he jumped and kneed one of them in the face, jumping into the middle of the sandbags. He shot and killed a militiaman he knocked out at close range. Stealing a grenade from the fallen militiaman, he pulled the pin out with his teeth and threw it into the pillbox shelter. The sound of the explosion and the enemy's screams came at almost the same time.

Turning toward violent engine sounds, Rentaro promptly rolled out of the way and a truck passed by with a roar, trying to run him over right where he had been. Moreover, there was a heavy machine gun installed in the bed of the truck. With a deafening explosive sound, the heavy machine gun spit fire. A second before the heavy machine gun caught Rentaro and blew him to smithereens, Rentaro rolled onto the sand and fired two shots rapidly, laying low.

The first shot was at the shooter of the heavy machine gun on the truck bed, and the other went through the head of the truck driver, killing him. The truck lost control and spun on its side, exploding and spitting up a pillar of fire.

Even as this was happening, the numbers of the remaining enemy were going down ridiculously quickly.

"The *21-Form Varanium Artificial Eye.* That is the true form of what is in Satomi's left eye." When Miori looked back, there was Kisara, brushing back her hair, her crisp footsteps sounding against the floor.

“Kisara… What is that?” asked Miori.

“Inside his left eye is a high-performance computer with a CPU that uses a graphene transistor wrapped in a Super-Varanium shell. Miori, would you believe me if I told you that people feel the passage of time differently?”

“Huh?”

“As a child, one day feels very long, but when you become old, a day goes by in an instant. Have you ever heard that? For example, assume that as a child, your brain can think about a hundred things in one minute, but when you become old, of course your brain function declines, and you can only think about ten things in one minute. If that’s the case, then what do you think happens?

“Don’t you think that a day for a child would feel ten times longer than a day for an elderly person? Time stretches and shrinks depending on the person. In addition to having various sensors, Satomi’s artificial eye is equipped with a multiplier function that overclocks the brain’s thought frequency thousands of times, so apparently time passes very slowly in the world Satomi sees. That’s why the enemy’s bullets don’t hit him.”

“B-but, that’s different from his body becoming faster, right?”

“Of course. But according to Satomi, it doesn’t work after the bullet has been fired, but figuring out a safe position based on the trajectory of the bullet before they pull the trigger isn’t that hard.”

“Is that even possible…?”

“It is. That is the true power of Rentaro Satomi, called the greatest masterpiece of the godlike doctor, Sumire Muroto, head of the New Humanity Creation Project.” However, instead of looking proud, Kisara, who was watching the monitor with her arms crossed, looked at Rentaro with sad eyes, murmuring.

“We’ve kept this from Enju, but when Satomi doesn’t unleash the power of his left eye, he can only see out of his right eye. His artificial left eye is set up to move the same way as his right eye, so no one can tell that he can’t see out of it.”

Miori was at a loss for words as she looked at the soldier on the monitor.

“But it’s not all bad. Satomi’s artificial limbs have pain sensory nerves made of carbon nanotubes, so they’re pretty much the same as a normal person—”

“Wait a minute, Kisara. There’s only one enemy left.”

This time, it was Kisara’s turn to tilt her head in question. “He’s almost cleared it then, right? What are you worried about?”

Miori tilted her head at Kisara and said each word slowly and distinctly. “The last person is a sniper.”

Rentaro stood stock-still in the middle of the enemy camp filled with piles of corpses. The area was enshrouded in flames warming his skin and smelled of gunpowder smoke. It was so hot that Rentaro tore off his necktie as he breathed with his shoulders heaving. His whole body was covered with sweat, and one of the XD guns had disappeared somewhere without him noticing.

The enemy was now nowhere to be seen.

Just as he started wondering if he had cleared the stage, something grazed the top of his shoulder. When he thought he had been shot, he sank to his knees and pressed the wound with his hand. The superthin shock paddles he stuck on his skin before entering the VR training room recreated the heat and pain of being hit by a bullet. Even though he had only been grazed, he gritted his teeth at the intense pain that felt like he had been cut.

He looked back and glared beyond the sand dune. “A sniper, huh?!”

The range finder built into the artificial eye found the enemy. The enemy was two hundred and twenty meters away. On top of being too far to see with the naked eye, the hot air created waves distorting his vision. The worst conditions for shooting.

The standard response here would be to get closer to the sniper while hiding in the shadows of the sand dunes. However, Rentaro did not do that but turned back toward the enemy and spread his legs shoulder width, holding his gun diagonally from the target’s point of view.

Tina’s voice played in the back of his mind. *“My life has just been pain. That’s why, right now, I’m having my first fun mood in a while.”*

Rentaro pulled the trigger slowly and fired. His shot went wide past the target by a long shot.

One more shot. This time, it was too low.

Shots were grazing his ears with ferocious speed, and his legs were shaking. The enemy was firing back. Torn between frustrating impatience and fear, he inhaled, then exhaled shakily. Closing his eyes, he cleared his ears with the sound of his own heartbeat. All living things eventually lose their lives and die and repeat the cycle of reincarnation. The way of the heavens and the reason that preserved harmony among all living things filled his heart, assimilated within him, and sharpened him.

A beam of light flashed in his head. He opened his eyes wide suddenly.

There! He pulled the trigger and fired. His arm was kicked back by the recoil, and an empty brass-colored cartridge spun as it was spit out.

The bullet grazed the upper right part of the Dragunov sniper rifle the sniper held and entered through his left eye socket. It shattered his skull, and the path taken by the bullet was in a vacuum for an instant. The next moment, his body systems were compressed, and his brain was destroyed.

The bullet that was the extension of Rentaro's arm had brought death to every single one of his virtual enemies. He took the Infinite Stance and quietly stayed on alert.

Rentaro Satomi was one with his gun.

There was a fanfare and the floating words MISSION COMPLETE, along with the smooth synthesized female voice saying the words.

The next thing he knew, he was back in the white room. Only the necktie scattered on the floor, the other XD gun, and the empty cartridges told him that the fight that had just happened was not a dream.

"Satomi dear, you're amazing! Two thousand, two hundred percent!" Miori screamed into the headset with excitement, causing feedback.

Rentaro yelled, holding his ears. "Be quiet! What do you mean, 2,200 percent?"

“Satomi dear, you used this simulator three times before, remember? If the average of your combat ability during those times is 100 percent, then that’s your combat power this time.”

I see, Rentaro muttered to himself. This meant that with his artificial eye unleashed, he was twenty-two times stronger than usual.

“Satomi dear, how much stronger would you be if you unleashed your arm and leg?”

“Roughly three times stronger that this.”

“Six thousand, six hundred percent! S-Satomi dear, take me now!”

Rentaro snorted.

“Wait, Miori, what are you saying? Satomi is mine! I’m all he sees!” Apparently, Kisara was also with her. “Miori, I’m sure you don’t know this, but Satomi attacked me like a beast and did all sorts of dirty things to me. My body is enough to satisfy him!”

The one who did all sorts of dirty things was Enju. That made Rentaro think of something suddenly. “Hey, Miori, Enju has used this simulator before, too, right? What are her numbers compared to mine?”

For some reason, that made Miori stammer, “Well…” evasively. Finally, she mumbled reluctantly, “Eight thousand, six hundred percent.”

Rentaro exhaled sharply. Well, that wasn’t unexpected. Enju had extraordinary strength for an Initiator. However, it might be paradoxical to think so, but Rentaro did not think that he could not beat her.

As part of a martial arts family, such as he was, he had experience and intuition that Enju lacked. Enju might think that if she made Rentaro miss with the exploding cartridges in his artificial limbs, she could win, but if she thought so naively, she would be easy to handle.

“Then what about the projected numbers for Tina, who beat Enju?” Rentaro asked.

“If the enemy’s specialty was sniping, thinking about it using common sense, going up against Enju would have been the worst matchup for her. If she won

despite that, then you should assume she is over 1.5 times stronger than Enju."

"Over 12,900 percent?!" It was a number that defied common sense. It wasn't that he had been optimistic, but this was…

"Satomi dear, you can use any of the equipment we have to offer. And we'll use the simulator to crush your weaknesses one by one."

There was some time before he answered.

"All right."

In any case, he didn't have any other choice. He had long abandoned the idea of running away.

"Now, we'll use an anti-sniper program next," said Miori.

At that moment, the world changed again.

"Situation two, stage name: *Killhouse*. Activating—"

5

Surprised, Tina jumped out of bed.

Reflected in her eyes were scattered junk food wrappers and foam food trays. Turning her head, she saw the bluish-white light of the moon shining into her room in her temporary residence. Water dripped from the faucet, falling with a splashing sound into a bowl, and the sound of the ticking secondhand of the clock on the wall slowly grew louder in her ears. It was three a.m.

Her underwear was drenched with sweat, and the back of her eyelids throbbed as she shook her head and pressed her hand to her temple.

As if it had been waiting for Tina to wake up, the cell phone next to her rang. "It's me," she said.

"What are you doing? How many times do you think I called you?"

"I'm sorry, Master…… I was taking a nap."

"I have the guard plan for the third conference. I'll send it to your device now."

The guard plan arrived on her PDA. She changed it to holodisplay mode, and it projected the images in the air. She looked over them quickly.

Tina frowned. What was this…?

“Those foolish people… How many times are they planning on repeating the same mistake? Well, it gives us the chance for our third assassination, though.”

“But Master… Isn’t there something strange about this?”

“What is?”

“Why are they using such a roundabout guard route? And this route contains a perfect sniping spot. It’s as if they are asking for it.” Tina continued inwardly. On top of that, the sniping spot was in District 39, where she had gone once with Rentaro before they discovered each other’s identities. Tina had a slight familiarity with the terrain.

“In other words, what are you trying to say?”

“Could it be a trap?”

Rand contemplated on the other side of the phone. “There is still no sign that our spy inside the Seitenshi’s palace has been discovered.”

“Master, I have a bad feeling about this. I think we should wait and see just this once.”

“No! You’ve already wasted two perfect chances, and our client is angry. We cannot fail!”

Then, as if he remembered something, her master’s voice dropped, and he asked, “Hey…Tina—Tina Sprout.”

“Yes?”

“I got information that the police officer and Initiator I ordered you to kill are still alive.”

Suddenly, an uncomfortable silence fell.

“I thought I delivered a killing blow,” Tina said, exaggerating her surprise a little. Immediately after, she reproached herself for being too obvious.

“Tina…my precious work of art. Surely you are not disobeying my orders?”

“Of course not, Master.” Her master stayed uncannily silent. Tina wiped the sweat on the palms of her hands on her skirt without letting him notice it.

“Tina, who is your master? Let me hear it.”

“You are, Master…I mean, Professor Rand.”

“To whom do you owe your life?”

“I owe everything to you, Professor Rand.”

“What are you?”

“I am your tool, Professor Rand.”

He paused on the other end. “Fine. There is no change to what you must do. However, I’m sure you understand this, but you cannot fail.”

“What if it is a trap?”

“Break through it by yourself. You should have enough strength for that, at least. However, if you are somehow about to be defeated”—Rand stopped before continuing—“Die.”

Tina clutched the hem of her skirt in her hands.

“Kill yourself.”

Tina calmed her breath and put her hands to her heart, closing her eyes. “I understand, Master.”

Once he heard that, Rand hung up without another word.

Tina turned her head and looked around her apartment. She would leave here soon, too. Opening the lid of the plastic container next to the bed, she poured the gasoline inside over everything in the room. Her head hurting from the gasoline vapors, Tina backed up to the door, then flicked the lighter and threw it inside. Snakes of flames reached all the way into the center of the room, and the whole room was enveloped in crimson flames.

Checking to make sure the fire alarm was working, she left the apartment. The fire truck appeared soon after, and shouts from curious onlookers started.

From a slight distance away, Tina watched the burning apartment as the flames pierced into the night sky. When a pillar burned down, the apartment

building collapsed in the cloud of ashes.

Even if Rand was a scientist, he was now taking orders from someone above him. There was no way he would change his mind just because she voiced her dissatisfaction to him. If that was the case, then all Tina could do was what she was ordered to do.

And even if the guard plan was a trap, what of it? Her own combat history as an Initiator was currently at a hundred straight wins. There was no one who could reach her.

However, when she fought the boy dressed in black, Tina had once thought that if there was someone who could defeat her, then it could possibly be—

Just recalling his face made her chest hurt with emotion. Even though the waves of heat on her skin were hot enough to burn, Tina hugged herself, shivering with cold, looking down.

“Please, don’t come…Rentaro…”

BLACK BULLET 2
CHAPTER 04

AGAINST A PERFECT SNIPER

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AGAINST A PERFECT SNIPER

It was the night of the final showdown. In the hospital room that had fallen silent, Rentaro stared at the sleeping Enju in the bed. Like yesterday, Enju was breathing healthily in her sleep, and her sleeping face was peaceful. In the end, the faint hope he had that the anesthetic would wear off early and that she would wake up did not come true.

He had no choice but to imagine the fight she had against Tina and how she had been defeated, but based on the crime scene riddled with bullet holes, there was little doubt that she had received an antitank rifle bullet to the stomach. She must have been scared and frightened.

Rentaro looked at the full moon shining outside the window and patted Enju's head. *Enju, if you were conscious, would you have been opposed to this like Doc was?*

But, he thought, raising his gaze, *Tina Sprout was a victim of this twisted world. If I have the power to straighten out the world, then I think it's worth risking my life, Enju.*

Rentaro put his hand softly on the head of the sleeping Enju. Then, he left the hospital and took the last train out to the Outer District. Rentaro got off at District 39. He had brought Tina here once. When he hadn't even dreamt that the two of them were mortal enemies.

As he went farther from the station, the surrounding sounds starting disappearing, and the sound of Rentaro's steps and breathing seemed too loud. It was neither hot nor cold. The wind was strong, but he continued walking, knowing this would barely count as a handicap for that sniper.

Perhaps because of the lack of streetlights, it took his eyes a while to adjust to the darkness, but eventually, the ruins of the Outer District that had gone through death emerged in front of him.

Buildings covered in vines that had cracked the pavement, buildings that had been burned down. The fires were not the work of the Gastrea. In urban areas, after people leave, dried branches and fallen leaves would pile up with no one to gather them. When lightning struck, it is a simple matter for that to develop into a raging fire.

Man-made environments crumble quickly when humans stop taking care of them. Rusted vehicles were crashed into one another, and abandoned cars could be seen everywhere. Inside cars and cell phones, there were small amounts of rare metals like silver, palladium, and gold, so these were called “city veins” and were an important source of income for the Manhole Children.

Just as Rentaro stepped into the center of District 39, his cell phone suddenly vibrated. He had been planning to look here and there until he had covered all of the Outer District, but this was much faster than expected.

Of course, he had no doubt who the person on the other end of the phone was.

“There’s nothing here after all, huh? You got me,” she said.

Rentaro looked around him while holding his phone to his ear, but he could not see Tina anywhere. Still, it was likely that the young sniper could see him. Rentaro set his eyes on the group of dilapidated buildings standing tall in front of him.

“Is this your idea of preventing the sniping? I know the location of the unofficial conference. If I leave now, I can still make it in time to go after the Seitenshi when she leaves the meeting.”

“My job is to keep you from doing that,” said Rentaro.

“My job is to kill the Seitenshi,” said Tina.

“Why, Tina? Why do you kill?”

Tina hesitated slightly. “This is the only way left for me to prove I have a reason

for existing.”

“That’s sad, Tina. You’re sad. Are you okay with that?”

Tina did not reply.

“If you’re saying that if I don’t fight, then you’re going to go kill the Lady Seitenshi, then I can’t let you go! The future of this country lies on the shoulders of that princess. If you want to kill her, then go after you kill me!” Rentaro rolled up the right arm and right leg of his uniform and stretched his arm straight out. After feeling some slight pain, there was a creaking sound, and fissures ran through his right arm and leg as the artificial skin warped and peeled off. His artificial limbs appeared to be black chrome, reflecting the light of the moon.

“I do not understand. The swordswoman, Kisara Tendo, was defeated. The ace, Enju Aihara, was defeated. You alone are left. You cannot defeat me.”

“I won’t know until I try, right?” At the same time, Rentaro unleashed the power of his artificial eye. The inside of his artificial left eye started spinning, and geometric patterns emerged on the iris.

A pungent smell hit his nose, and his body became hot. After unleashing his power, Rentaro lowered his hips and held his stance quietly. The Tendo Martial Arts Infinite Stance was a battle form filled with the meaning of the eternally limitless existence of the heavens and the earth.

“Now, let’s settle this, Tina!” Rentaro gazed at the darkness, still in his stance. He was attacked by a suffocating thirst for blood, and he gritted his teeth and gripped the dirt hard with the bottom of his boots.

The enemy used a Bit from the thought-drive interface, Shenfield, to scout his location. The second he was caught by the Bit, he was sure he would see a perfectly precise sniper bullet flying toward him.

The scene of the final showdown was the block of land where the dilapidated buildings were lined up. Of all the places in District 39, this was an urban area, but it was of course all ruined, so there was no fear of damaging the surrounding areas.

Rentaro had been given various secret plans by Miori. But there was no way Tina had come empty-handed, either.

Sharpening his five senses, he extinguished himself and became one with nature. The wind howled, caressing him from the back of his neck to his cheek. Rentaro didn't move an inch, focusing all his concentration on his senses of touch and hearing.

There was a flicker, and for a second, he saw light coming from the roof of a tall skyscraper far away. There was a slight vibration in the air, and his sensitive skin, radarlike, felt a round object flying through the air.

Here it comes! thought Rentaro. "Tendo Martial Arts First Style, Number 3—" The sound of an explosion rang in the air, and the extractor that ran along Rentaro's fake ulnar nerve on his artificial arm picked up empty golden shell casings and kicked them out as they rotated. "Rokuro Kabuto!"

His fist, sped up through cartridge propulsion, grasped the superfast antitank sniper rifle bullet. The explosive sound of impact rang throughout the ruins, and the shock wave blew away all the gravel around him. The fist he sent out twisting crashed into the sniper bullet, smashing it to smithereens. He had pulverized a .50-caliber armor-piercing bullet with a jacket made of tungsten carbide with over thirty times the kinetic energy and destructive power of a 9-mm handgun bullet.

He should not have been able to hear it, but Rentaro was sure he heard Tina gasp in astonishment.

Rentaro activated the range finder in his left eye and had it calculate the position of the shooter from the direction of the shot. The distance to Tina—1.5 kilometers directly in front of him. It was hard to believe how far away she had shot from.

He quickly took his smartphone out of his pocket and glared at the screen. There was a small golf-ball-size attachment installed on his phone. It was a supersmall sound sensor installed to use with a sniper detection application that Shiba Heavy Weapons had spent an enormous amount of money developing.

As if confirming Rentaro's prediction, the cursor indicated a sniper bullet approaching from the front. There was no mistaking it.

Rentaro put both hands on the ground abruptly and raised his hips, taking a stance like that of a sprinter. He raised his eyes with a roar, glaring at the

skyscraper soaring high above its surroundings in front of him.

Target, 1.5 kilometers ahead—*Fire*.

The next instant, the bottom of the cartridge hit the striker of the fake hidden nerve and exploded. An empty cartridge was ejected. The mobility thruster in his leg fired, accelerating him almost to the point of being blown away, and he sprinted forward.

He didn't have time to worry about the sniper bullet that flew in at a great speed and gouged out the area Rentaro had just been. In the midst of such strong headwinds that he could hardly open his eyes, he barely evaded the large rocks and cars that were coming at him with terrifying speed, plunging into the crack in the stone wall, dashing into the dilapidated building with a whirlwind behind him.

The skyscraper grew steadily bigger in front of him.

There was a faint glimmer of light on the other side of the building, and Rentaro realized that a third shot had been fired. He gave himself another boost by firing off another cartridge in his leg. Immediately afterward, a sniper bullet gouged out the area behind him with a high-pitched screech.

Rentaro was shocked as he felt intense pain that seemed to rip his body apart. When he used his leg thrusters, he reached a top speed of a hundred and fifty kilometers and could barely even be seen.

Tina not only followed his movements, but she also predicted where he would be and shot after calculating enough lead time. Rentaro and Tina were both using techniques beyond the abilities of humans.

There were only six hundred meters left between him and Tina. Rentaro fired a third cartridge and rode it quickly into the skyscraper with violent momentum, but as he got closer, his heart beat hard, recalling a different type of worry.

When a sniper bullet was fired from a kilometer away, there was about a second between seeing the light of the muzzle fire and having the bullet approach him. He knew this because he had experienced this many times firsthand.

Up until now, he had always started taking evasive action after seeing the light,

but the closer he got, the shorter the time would be between when he could see the muzzle fire and when the bullet came flying at him.

As if Tina could miss at this distance.

Just then, he saw another flicker of orange muzzle fire from the roof of the skyscraper and gasped in surprise.

Shoot, Rentaro thought as it hit his Super-Varanium right arm. He fell from his superaccelerated state and rolled once, getting chills. He was going to be smashed into the wall. Would he be crushed to death? No, he had to stand back up.

He changed the position of the thruster in his leg so that it stuck out to the side, and fired. Gritting his teeth, he forcefully twisted against the inertia, crossing his arms in front of his head and aiming to crash through the entrance of a nearby building headfirst.

With a loud crash, he smashed through the glass and rolled a few times on the floor of the entrance before forcing himself to stand up. There was damage to his inner ear that caused him to lose his sense of balance, and his legs danced like those of a groggy boxer. The joints in his body were in pain, and blood spread inside his mouth. Apparently, he had a cut somewhere in there.

It took some time before he was able to calm his ragged breathing and look around to survey his surroundings. Tilting his head, he could see that even though the building was dilapidated, the atrium that reached the ceiling looked pretty nice. It had probably been a state-of-the-art intelligent building before the Gastrea War. It wasn't as tall as the building Tina was shooting from, but it was still pretty tall.

He couldn't just stay here. She had the Shenfield.

Rentaro quietly slid under the decaying marble reception desk. Soon after, a fist-size round object turned silently into the entrance. There was no mistaking it; it was a Bit that Tina was controlling. It was his first time actually seeing it, but it must have been what had been observing Rentaro and his surroundings before. It barely made a sound as it flew, and was probably built for clandestine activities.

The Bit acted like a living thing and floated mysteriously as it scanned the area around it with lasers, investigating the topography. The Bit neared Rentaro slowly but surely.

As Rentaro carefully pulled his gun from his holster without making a sound, he pressed the safety to be ready to fire. Calming his wildly beating heart, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. As he flew out from under the reception desk, he was caught by the Bit's sights, and the Bit turned sharply to face him.

Rentaro fired without missing and shot out the Bit's camera eye. In an instant, the Bit was flying around lopsidedly. Before long, he had thrown it to the floor, scattering sparks, and after some slight death throes, it ran out of power and was completely silent.

This was good. Rentaro smiled inwardly. This Bit was Tina's eye. If he destroyed all three of the Bits Tina controlled with her neurochip, then he would be able to shut down her unparalleled precise shooting. If he destroyed the other two like this, hiding under the reception desk—

Just then, his breast pocket vibrated, and he pulled out his phone. He was dumbfounded when he saw that the caller was Miori Shiba. What was she thinking? She should have known full well that he was in the middle of a battle.

No, he reconsidered. She must have thought he hadn't started yet and had something she just had to tell him. He pushed the button and picked up the phone.

"Satomi dear, are you alive? I have the results of the analysis of the machine gun!" said Miori's familiar drawl.

He frowned, wondering what she was talking about, and then remembered the pieces of the heavy machine gun that were collected from the scene where Enju had been shot. If he remembered correctly, Inspector Tadashima had said that Enju had been shot from four different directions. He knew that one was a shot from Tina. But the remaining three—"Did Tina have help after all?"

"No! The machine guns retrieved had remote control modules installed. In other words—"

There was the faint buzzing of a machine operating, and Rentaro looked up

with his phone still on his ear. He froze as he came face-to-face with another Bit looking down at him.

The second one? When did it get here? Rentaro muttered in shock, “This is bad, Miori… It’s found me…”

“Satomi dear, get out of the wayyyyyyy!” At Miori’s scream, he came back to himself and reflexively jumped forward diagonally to the right.

What happened afterward was beyond the bounds of common sense. The sound of gunshots came from all directions at superfast speeds and went past him, scattering debris from the walls that were hit, splintering them.

Rentaro turned sharply and aimed the muzzle of his gun at the Bit, but the Bit had already disappeared.

He calmed his ragged breathing. *What was that just now?* He immediately looked at the sniper sensor on his smartphone, but the cursor looked like it was confused and was pointing at six random places. No, were these really random?

“I just confirmed it with the Shiba Heavy Weapons satellite. There are five Barrett antitank rifles set up around you, Satomi dear!” The satellite was probably a man-made satellite owned by Shiba Heavy Weapons that could take night images by the gigapixel.

Antitank rifles set in five places, remote-control devices, Shenfield—

After being told this much, even Rentaro understood. Tina used her brain machine interface not just for the Shenfield, but also to remotely control the antitank rifles set up in five places.

Rentaro felt chills suddenly and rubbed his upper arms. That was absurd. Wasn’t ballistic sniping something that could only be done by experts, who could aim in the direction the enemy was heading and control the movement of their arms? Wasn’t it holy ground that only humans could inhabit that machines could not copy?

Why didn’t she use it until now? It was obvious. It was to draw Rentaro in so that he would be caught in her besiegement. Now that he had been seen by the Bit, .50-caliber armor-piercing bullets with terrifying penetrating power would come flying at him from five directions, plus a sixth direction where Tina was.

Though the building had been left at the mercy of time for ten years, just now, Tina's bullet had penetrated the outer wall and flown right at Rentaro.

In his mind, he could see the vision of himself caught in a spiderweb, struggling. He shook his head gently in despair. It was this. This was what had gotten Enju Aihara.

Rentaro thought he had slipped past Tina's sniper bullet to get close to her, but that wasn't the case at all. Instead, she had drawn him deliberately in.

Tina Sprout, a transcendently perfect sniper.

It was a miracle that he had escaped the bullet just now. If another came at him—

Rentaro's vision darkened in despair, and he shook his head hurriedly. *Think, Rentaro Satomi. If you stop thinking now, next time, you really* will *be killed!* Anyway, he couldn't stop here. The Bit had already found him.

Even so, if he left this building with an unobstructed view and went outside, it would be suicide. After being spotted by the Bit, he would be full of holes.

Rentaro turned his head and looked at the atrium that reached the ceiling. His only option was to climb the building. And intercept all the Bits that infiltrated before they could enter his location coordinates.

The Bits were black. They were probably made of Varanium. If he aimed for their hard outer shells, the bullets would just be repelled, and he would not destroy them. His only choice was probably to aim for the camera eye, which was equipped with different sensors. He had succeeded earlier, but he wasn't sure if he could manage the accuracy needed to hit a moving target so many times. He had no choice but to try, though.

Rentaro jumped out from under the reception desk and started climbing the stairs. As he climbed the sharply turning stairs, he stopped at every floor, hiding himself as he searched for the best floor to fight on.

From the second floor to the twentieth floor, there wasn't really anywhere to hide himself. Things that could have been used had been stolen long ago, and the floors were mostly empty.

When he peeked into the twenty-fourth floor, he thought, *This is it.* The twenty-fourth floor had been a typical office floor. Furniture that was hard to carry out had unsurprisingly been left behind by the thieves. Rusted steel desks remained, mazelike, wires hung from the broken ceiling, and sand that had blown in through the smashed windows accumulated at his feet. Thankfully, however, it was not lacking in places to hide.

Rentaro stepped quietly and hid himself in the hollow of a wall. He could have hidden under a desk or in a locker, but he decided that places that were easy to hide in would be the first ones to be searched.

Rentaro quieted his breath, pressed his back right up against the wall, and succumbed to an endless stream of introspection. Was the twenty-fourth floor really a good place to hide? If he went to a higher floor, there might be a better structure for him to hide in. By choosing the twenty-fourth floor, he'd abandoned that possibility, hadn't he?

The small bud of anxiety eventually grew large, and he started feeling like his worries were founded. Just when he'd made up his mind to move from this place immediately, there was the sound of a machine moving, quiet enough that he wasn't even sure he was hearing it. The normal Rentaro would definitely have missed it.

Rentaro poked his face out from the hollow in the wall and then hurriedly pulled it back in.

A Bit had infiltrated through the crack of a broken window. As Rentaro calmed his pounding heart, he peeked into the room again to see what was going on. The Bit floated carefully as it scanned under the desk and in the locker. If he had hidden there, it would have been over in an instant. His instincts hadn't been wrong, after all.

As he held his XD and tried to find the right timing to jump out, another Bit suddenly came from an unexpected direction and cut in front of the hollow in the wall. Surprised for the third time, he hid his body inside the wall. The other Bit had come up in a pincer attack, from the stairs Rentaro had climbed.

The Bits seemed to be whispering to one another as they communicated. They looked like they were asking one another, "How about it? Was he there?"

Rentaro wiped his sweaty palms on his pants and took a deep breath. It was all or nothing as he jumped out and fired continuous shots.

Before the Bit on the left could figure out what had happened, its camera eye had been destroyed by a .40-caliber bullet. However, the Bit on the right was hit on its shell and repelled the bullet. It bobbed as it lost its balance, but quickly righted itself and found Rentaro with its camera eye.

He didn't even have time to regret his mistake, but jumped forward with all of his strength.

The next instant, there was a barrage of gunfire. Rentaro grimaced as a hot bullet grazed his side, but he wasn't going to let it get away, and grabbed the Bit, rolling on the floor as he shot at it. There was a loud crash as he smashed it against the wall.

Then, the Shenfield was silent. A silence that hurt his ears returned to the dilapidated building.

As he sniffed the gunpowder smoke, Rentaro pressed his right side and stood up. He felt an upsettingly slippery substance, and when he looked at the palm of his right hand, there was dark red blood on it. *Damn it.* He was lucky to be alive, but if he'd had his way he would have preferred to avoid taking any damage that would hinder his movements before his final battle with Tina.

He injected a small vial of morphine into his stomach. He didn't have the AGV test drug that regenerated his wounds this time, like he had when he fought the demon, Kagetane Hiruko. It had a side effect that made twenty percent of the test subjects into Gastrea, so when he told Sumire that he had used all that she had given him, she gave him a good scolding. Besides, this time, he and Sumire had parted with a fight, so either way, he couldn't count on getting that drug.

He thought about what he should do next, but before he knew it, he had started walking upstairs for some reason. He wondered why, but since he had no plan at the moment, all he could do was rely on his instincts.

When he arrived at the iron door to the roof, he finally understood what he had been trying to do. First, he opened the door quietly with his back to the wall. After confirming that there was no sniper bullet being shot at him, he looked at the skyscraper standing tall before him.

There was no sign that she was going to snipe him. She might have lost his position after losing all the Bits. That would have been great for him.

Going through the door, he was hit by strong eddies of wind blowing around the building and had to hold down his hair. He walked over to the fence that came up to his hips to prevent falling and peeked down. The ground was dizzyingly far away, and it looked like it was opening its mouth wide like the bottom of Hades. The faraway building Tina was in was easily two hundred meters away.

Cold sweat ran down his cheek. Was he really going to do it? It was crazy. However, he was resolved to do this. In order to hold his own against someone with the superhigh ranking of 98, he had to take some risks.

Rentaro let go of the handrail and went to the handrail on the other side. There, he fixed his eyes straight on the skyscraper and started running. He started slowly, at a walking speed. Slowly approaching the edge of the building, he started running full strength, as if tripping, and kicked the ground, flying over the whole fence. There, he fired a cartridge in his leg. The cartridge fired with a *Bam!* and ejected. Immediately afterward, Rentaro's body was flying toward the skyscraper through the sky so fast that he couldn't even open his eyes. He fired off cartridges in his leg in rapid succession.

Tina had noticed. He thought he saw an orange flash of muzzle fire, and then a bullet whooshed toward him with a screech and grazed his side. This was her sniping without the Shenfield. However, her precision was as threatening as before.

Tina fired her antitank rifle repeatedly. From the short intervals between shots, Rentaro could tell that Tina was also flustered.

Each time Rentaro fired off a cartridge, he changed the angle of the thruster in his leg slightly to slip past the fatal sniper bullets one after another.

The skyscraper got bigger before his eyes.

Slipping past two more of Tina's sniper bullets, Rentaro fired his last leg cartridge. "Gooooooooooooo!" he yelled.

The glass window approached with terrifying momentum, and Rentaro drew

his gun and fired twice into the window as he plunged in. With a shrill sound, Rentaro broke through the glass and was thrown over ten meters as he rolled on the floor. Putting both hands on the ground, he forced his body up. As he did so, drool dripped onto the floor. His ears were ringing, he was nauseated, and he felt strange chills. He was blacking out after being exposed to extreme g-forces.

But—he had finally made it. He was probably about ten floors down from the roof where Tina was at that very moment.

Rentaro thought as he stood up. Looking behind him, he saw the roof he was just on far away. He still couldn't believe he'd flown that distance to get here. However, if he hadn't done so, he wouldn't have been able to even get close to Tina.

Since Tina was a sniper, she probably would not like to be approached from underneath, where she could not shoot. There were undoubtedly plastic explosives and antipersonnel land mines on the first floor of the skyscraper, and there was no doubt that the minute Rentaro stepped inside, he would have been caught in a trap that could blow him to pieces.

However, Tina could not have predicted that a normal person like Rentaro would approach her in this way.

Rentaro looked at the ceiling. Round two was about to begin.

Rentaro took four cartridges from his artificial arm and used them to refill his artificial leg, which had heated up. He changed the magazine of his XD gun. He pulled the SureFire military flashlight from his waist and held his XD in his right hand and the flashlight in his left. Crossing his arms, he climbed the stairs with the backs of his hands together.

Of course, there was no electricity, so he could not use the elevator. Even if there *was* electricity, it was unthinkable to use something that would ding and report his arrival to his opponent. Climbing the stairs cautiously, he reviewed what he knew in his head.

Tina Sprout was an Initiator with the Owl Gastrea Factor. The majority of owls are nocturnal, but good night vision is not their only distinguishing characteristic. What was to be feared even more is their keen hearing that can pick out even the faintest sound from the movement of their prey. It was completely natural to imagine that Tina's hearing was also very good. From here on out, he would have to do his utmost to not make a sound.

The moonlight shone on the bluish-white world, the air on his skin was chilly, and it became silent.

Being careful as he stepped, Rentaro muttered to himself that this was the first time he had fought this way, now that he thought about it. Both Kohina Hiruko and Enju Aihara were the straightforward martial artist types who didn't use a lot of tricks. Compared to them, the person Rentaro was facing now, Tina Sprout, was a soldier type, like him. Someone who used guns to get around traps and was good at handling explosives. This was an enemy who would do any kind of sneak attack to win. If he let his guard down for a second, he would be killed.

He was carefully keeping his footsteps silent as he made his way to the roof, but when he got there, all he saw was an abandoned antitank rifle and empty magazines scattered around it. There was no sign of Tina. She must have hidden on one of the floors.

First, he would go one floor down to the floor he had just passed.

The floor was divided into three rooms. The instant he got to one of them,

Rentaro sensed that something was off and stopped. It was dark. It was too dark. It wasn't that his vision wasn't working, but that there wasn't even moonlight shining in. All the windows had probably been sealed. Why? It was obvious. His opponent had night vision and keen hearing. She could move perfectly fine even in the dark.

There were two shell casings lying on the ground at the entrance to the floor. Under normal circumstances, he would be convinced that Tina was concealed here. But Rentaro wasn't sure after he saw them. Why would she leave shell casings on the floor on purpose? It was as if she was advertising her presence.

If that was the case, then he would have to work out a Plan B.

Rentaro fished around in the pouch around his waist and pulled out a bundle of something made of carbon. Rentaro pushed a button to make it return to its original shape, and what had been a folded frame instantly took on a ball shape, and a sensor inside it activated.

It was a pocket sensor package he had gotten from Miori. It had a thermal sensor and motion sensor, and if there was anything moving inside other than Rentaro, it was linked to Rentaro's smartphone and would send an alert with the enemy's position.

Rentaro threw the pocket sensor inside. He waited for a while, but there was no response. But with just that, he was still nervous about rushing in.

Rentaro pulled out a stun grenade and pulled the pin out with his teeth. Concealing his body against the wall, he waited for the sound and light of the explosion to pass and then went in. Using his flashlight to look around, Rentaro cursed involuntarily. It was spacious inside, and there were stone pillars in a few places, but like on the roof, Tina was not there.

It had been a decoy after all. With the explosion just now, Tina definitely knew which floor Rentaro was on. Rentaro started to feel like he was suffocating. With Tina's specially evolved sight and hearing, a stun grenade, which spread sound, light, and pressure, would have been perfect to use against her. But he had just used it up.

Now that he thought about it, Rentaro realized that he had not seen Tina once since this battle started. Was Tina Sprout really in this building? The sudden

horrifying thought clouded his mind, and he shook his head. No way, what was he thinking? His mind was filled with anxiety and fear and wasn't thinking straight.

Amazed at how the darkness that prevented him from seeing was able to take away a person's reason and presence of mind, Rentaro went down to the next floor. Its layout was exactly the same as the floor above, with the same forest of stone pillars in the sprawling space. Holding his gun ready, he hid himself behind the pillars, carefully examining the whole floor.

Just then, he was startled by the sound of an alert on his phone. Hurriedly pulling out his phone, he saw that the pocket sensor he had thrown earlier had picked something up upstairs. A chill went down his spine. It was impossible. Even as he tried to make himself believe that it had picked up a mouse or something else that just happened to pass through, the alert continued to ring noisily, as if screaming.

He was sure that Tina had not been in that room. Unless Tina was able to appear and disappear like a ghost?

Then, he saw the emergency exit out of the corner of his eye and suddenly understood. That should connect to the outer stairs. Of course, the outer stairs of a skyscraper would get a lot of wind, and in order to prevent falls, it would be strictly locked. It was probably never used by anyone other than the building manager and the janitors. However, what if Tina had unlocked it ahead of time? What if she had escaped out the emergency exit to the outer stairs when Rentaro threw the stun grenade inside, waiting for the opportunity to return?

Instantly, he pulled out his spare XD and held both guns, with his left hand pointed at the outer stairs, and his right hand pointed at the inner stairs he had just come down. His breathing got shallower and shorter, and he almost screamed in fear. The alert grating his nerves would not stop. It was as if it was saying, "Run away! Run away!"

Suddenly, the sound broke off, the sensor stopped ringing, and a heavy silence fell. The tension left his shoulders. It was some kind of animal after all, right?

Holding one of his guns with his teeth, he used the freed hand to pull out his smartphone and looked at the screen. He saw the words SENSOR CRASH in big letters

across the screen and felt a chill down his spine like he had been put into a block of ice. The sensor had not stopped ringing, it had been destroyed. That meant that Tina was—

Just then, he heard a noise. He turned his head up quickly toward it, and a Rank 98 battle demon rained down with pieces of concrete. Rentaro looked at the scene in despair. It was unexpected revenge for the move Kisara had used to destroy the floor during the shooting incident at the Tendo Civil Security Agency.

Even as Rentaro paled, he put all his strength into his roundhouse kick that was aiming for Tina's neck to use as a spring to escape. A terrifying faint buzz passed near his ear, and he started pouring cold sweat. He rolled forward like that a few times, pulling the triggers on the XD guns in both hands, firing as much as he could to shower Tina in bullets.

Tina held out a one-touch unfolding polycarbonate shield and took the whole barrage of twenty-four bullets.

Both of Rentaro's XDs ran out of bullets at the same time. Tina must have decided that was a good time to throw away the cracked shield and plunged toward him with the speed of a bullet.

In the civsec officer combat manual, they were told to avoid a close-in fight with an Initiator at all costs. Rentaro abandoned his XDs and gritted his teeth. He dropped his hips to intercept Tina. His artificial eye gave off heat as it spun, calculating at superspeeds. The moment Rentaro saw the reflection of the moonlight on the dagger in the darkness, he pulled back his right arm. *Tendo Martial Arts First Style, Number 5*—At the same time, a cartridge spun and was spit out, and the smell of gunpowder filled his nostrils. *"Kohaku Tensei!"*

There was a screech. Tina's flash like lightning and Rentaro's superfast thrust clashed, and there was an explosion at the point of impact. The sand that had accumulated on the floor was blown away, and the shock wave shattered all the windows.

Both of them left skid marks on the ground as they were thrown back. Rentaro jumped for the XD that had fallen to the ground and reloaded it, pointing the muzzle at Tina, but that was when he gasped in surprise, realizing she had disappeared.

Rentaro cautiously held his gun ready as he stepped backward and hid behind a pillar. This was bad. The darkness was on her side. Her owl eyes could amplify the light and see into the darkness, and in the worst-case scenario, her owl ears could probably even pick out the sound of Rentaro's breathing. How was he going to crush her advantage?

Just then, something bounced on the floor with a clang, and a round green object rolled before Rentaro's eyes. All the hairs on Rentaro's body stood on end —it was a fragmentation grenade. His mind went blank, and he kicked the hand grenade and then jumped to take cover.

There was an explosion. A number of fragments bit into his skin, tearing it away, and the intense pain burned into his brain. He had no time to writhe in agony. His brain was screaming that he should not be here.

Forcing all his muscles to move, he promptly rolled to the side, and the next instant, Tina's kick fell right where Rentaro had just been, smashing the concrete road and all. Rentaro gave a roar and swung out to trip her. He got her, but Tina acrobatically put a hand on the ground and quickly backflipped to escape.

Tina reached her hand into the hem of her dress and threw out a round black object. After the faint activation sound, it floated with its single eye flashing and then headed toward Rentaro at full speed. There was no doubt about it. It was definitely a Shenfield Bit.

A fourth? Why would a scout approach him?

For some reason, he got terrible chills, and as he stood, he shot his gun a few times, but the Bit skillfully avoided all the bullets and closed in on him. Realizing that he was in trouble, Rentaro promptly pulled the pin of an incendiary grenade to ignite it, but the enemy was overwhelmingly faster. The single camera lens stared him in the eye, and the soulless machine seemed to smile creepily, narrowing its gaze.

Rentaro didn't have time to be surprised before the Bit self-destructed at his chest. Thrown back by the large explosion that burned his skin, his body bounced on the floor before being thrown into a pillar, back first. He was in so much pain that he gritted his teeth until a molar splintered, and his vision started to go black.

Rentaro gave a sickening cough, and blood started to overflow from his mouth without stopping, the warm blood wetting his chest. Fluttering his heavy eyelids to look in front of him, he saw that Tina had two more Bits deployed around her, on guard against him.

Right between Rentaro and Tina was the incendiary grenade that Rentaro had pulled out. The ignition pin had been taken out, and the safety was off, but it didn't explode no matter how much time passed. It was a dud. In the end, even luck had abandoned him. In any case, the range where the thermite reaction from the combustion of the incendiary grenade would have caused heat damage was too far away from Tina to do any good.

His clothes were scorched in the fumes of the explosion and gave off a terrible smell. Three large pieces of the Bit were stuck in his chest, like a grotesque art piece. He could not move another finger. Rentaro quietly shook his head left and right, and sighed shakily, enduring the pain in his injured lungs. She was too strong. Blood that wouldn't stop flowing was dripping to the ground from different places of his body. Even though his skin was burned and blistered, because he was losing blood by the minute, his body started to feel frozen with cold.

Was he about to die? In a place like this? It didn't make sense. His vision blurred, and his consciousness started to fade. In the back of his mind, memories of fun times flowed like a slideshow.

Suddenly, he remembered a movie he watched with Enju at a repertory cinema called *Barry Lyndon*. Apparently, it was made by a director named Kubrick, and after the movie was over, right before moving on to the credits, on a completely black screen, a written epilogue suddenly appeared.

GOOD OR BAD, HANDSOME OR UGLY, RICH OR POOR THEY ARE ALL EQUAL NOW, it had said. If that was the enlightenment reached by someone who lived many times what he lived, then it was too sad. It was too terrible a nihilism. He felt like he was getting sucked into the bottom of a dark hole.

It was cold. It was dark. *Damn it.*

Jeez, I'm dying.

"Rentaro."

A familiar girl's voice suddenly flowed into his slowly fading consciousness.

Just then, there was the sound of a sudden explosion. A thermite blaze shot up between them, and an inferno manifested. Rentaro was struck dumb. Was it the incendiary grenade?

Normally, it took only a few seconds between throwing the grenade at the target and the detonation.

If it were a very defective product, it could take dozens of seconds before it exploded. Something that didn't explode after that was a complete dud. According to his body clock, it had been about a minute since he dropped the incendiary grenade. There was no way it would suddenly explode—

When he looked, he saw Tina with her arm raised covering her eyes. Doubts were raised in his head. Why? It was true that there was faint moonlight here, and it wasn't like he couldn't see anything. But looking at the struggling Tina covering her face, barely able to stand, let alone walk, it was as if she could not see anything at all.

Realization dawned on him. She actually could not see anything. Her owl night vision must have backfired, letting in too much light at once with its light amplification abilities, clouding her vision completely white.

Enju, was it you? Did you make this miracle happen?

This was a golden opportunity. His last chance. That's right. He hadn't lost yet.

I'm here bearing the hopes of Enju, Kisara, Sumire, Miori, and the Seitenshi.

There was a world he needed to return to.

There were people waiting for his return.

"It's not over yet!!!!!"

He mustered the last of his strength. As blood streamed from his whole body, the puddle at his feet expanded rapidly. But, he didn't care. He used the last of his strength to get into the Tendo Martial Arts Water and Sky Stance. He fired a leg cartridge and ignited the mobility thruster in his leg. Accelerating violently, he passed through the thermite blaze and jumped out in front of Tina. From Tina's perspective, it looked as if Rentaro had jumped out of a curtain of hellfire

at two thousand degrees Celsius.

“Raaaaaaagh!” he roared.

Going around the Shenfield that had come out to defend her, Rentaro stepped on Tina’s right leg with his boot and rammed into her with his shoulder.

Tendo Martial Arts Third Style, Number 9: Usarocho.

With a crack, Tina’s thin body was knocked away, and she let out a cry. When he rammed into her while stepping on her leg, it would be hard for her to absorb the shock, so if he got a good hit in, he could cause enough damage to turn her organs inside out.

Tina couldn’t help but totter a few steps forward.

Rentaro wasn’t one to pass up that chance.

“Tendo Martial Arts First Style, Number 15—”

With the sound of the explosion from a cartridge firing in his arm, he caught a fleeting glimpse of regret on Tina’s face.

“Oh n—,” she said.

“Unebi Koryuu!” The uppercut with intense destructive power broke the dagger Tina had drawn to defend herself and exploded. Tina’s body was blown back easily, and it smashed concrete as it made the ceiling cave in.

“Tendo Martial Arts Second Style, Number 4—” Rentaro stretched his right leg straight out and kept it straight as he raised it overhead. Like a baseball pitcher’s special stance, his leg was at a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree angle with the bottom of his shoe facing the sky, and then became still.

Tina’s body became unstuck from the ceiling and fell down, powerlessly. Tina looked at him with weak eyes.

There were three consecutive blasts from his leg. The three empty golden shell casings spun as they were ejected, glittering as they reflected the swaying light of the flame.

The smell of gunpowder filled his nostrils.

In no time, all sound disappeared. The world was quiet and calm.

Rentaro closed his eyes.

“Inzen Jokahanameishi Burst!”

His heel came down in an axe kick like an iron hammer, hitting Tina cleanly. An extreme tremor shook the whole floor, and large parts of the floor caved in and fell through. The enormous energy of three shots of large-caliber cartridges blew Tina’s body away like sick leaves and then broke through the floor with a thunderous roar.

After a tremor so large it seemed like it would destroy the whole skyscraper, the noise finally stopped. Looking down, at the bottom of a hole that looked like a series of reflected mirrors, on a floor eight stories down, was Tina’s prone body. After going through eight floors, she had finally stopped, it seemed.

Tina was passed out at the center of the explosion, unable to continue fighting. The flames stretching up threw Rentaro’s long shadow on the floor. Rentaro let out a breath quietly and continued to be alert as he took the Infinite Stance. Then, his vision swayed, and before he knew it, Rentaro was also lying spread-eagle on his back. His head was pounding, and he was dizzy and nauseated. Even now, his body felt like it would disintegrate. *I can’t believe I fought with this body*, he thought in utter amazement as he stared at the ceiling.

He closed in on a sniper from 1.5 kilometers away and crushed her in close combat. Considering that the by-the-book tactic to deal with a sniper was called a counter-snipe, where you sniped the sniper, it made him realize just how crazy his strategy was.

Rentaro got up, slightly annoyed that he had to, and putting one knee on the ground he put a hand on his knee and forced himself to his feet. He let out shallow, short breaths like a wounded animal. His whole body felt like a bundle of pain nerves. Just breathing in made his lungs hurt. Saliva mixed with dark red blood dripped from his mouth, and he spit blood on the ground. He wiped his mouth. This was no time for strong emotions. Rentaro still had something he had to do.

Putting his hand on the wall, he went down eight flights of stairs, where Tina was lying. Rentaro aimed his gun between Tina’s brows as he approached her. Tina’s clothes were tattered, and she had a number of broken bones. She had

gotten a good hit from a Super-Varanium axe kick, so her body probably wouldn't do what she wanted it to do for a while.

Tina wheezed, tilting just her head toward him, opening her eyes slightly to look at Rentaro. "Ren…taro… Please…finish me…off…"

Rentaro didn't say anything. His eyes met Tina's. His strong feelings of victory disappeared, and he didn't feel angry or sad, either. The only thing left was emptiness.

Tina continued her disconnected groans. "My…body…is a mass of… technology… I cannot live…and be caught…by another country…"

Kill her. If he did so, he would be able to completely remove the threat to the Seitenshi. Either way, if he handed her over to the police, he didn't think an Initiator who attempted to assassinate a national ruler would be treated very well. Even more worrisome was what the man pulling her strings, Ain Rand, was after. Putting together what Sumire had said, Rand didn't think of humans as human. It wouldn't be strange for a man like that to have ordered Tina to kill herself immediately after being defeated. If Rand found out that she had not chosen to die, then it was possible that Tina would be the next assassination target.

No matter what happened, Rentaro had a hard time seeing a bright future for Tina after she survived today.

Rentaro put strength into the finger on the trigger of his gun. Finally, he nodded once with resolve and closed his eyes. He put his gun away, helped Tina up, and supported her with his shoulder.

Tina's eyes opened wide in surprise. "Why…?"

"I didn't fight because I wanted to kill you." Rentaro kept his gaze in front of him and focused on the hospital beyond the wall. "Besides, you saved Enju… Thank you. I kept wanting to tell you that. I'll make sure they don't treat you badly!" Through his shoulder, he could feel Tina shaking, and then next to him, he heard the sound of small sobs leaking out. Rentaro tried to pretend not to notice as something hot and wet soaked his shoulder.

"I've lost everything. Even though all I had was my fighting ability, I lost, so

now everything is gone.”

Rentaro didn’t say anything.

“Rentaro… I don’t know anything anymore. Why did things turn out this way…? What should I do…? I have no idea. This wasn’t what was supposed to happen. My life keeps turning strange, so now I really don’t know what I’m supposed to do……”

“Don’t talk. It’ll make your injuries worse.” And then, Rentaro, supporting Tina with his shoulder, walked down the long flight of stairs, one step at a time. The first floor was a nest of explosives, as Rentaro had imagined, but luckily, they were not the type that exploded automatically when triggered by movement. They were all the remote control type, so since Tina was out of commission, it didn’t seem like they would be a problem.

When they left the moldy building, they were met with fresh air and moonlight. Rentaro lifted his face.

First, to the hospital.

“I’ll have you take responsibility for this.” Surprised, he looked next to him and saw Tina smiling weakly with her eyes swollen from crying. “You defeated me, so I’ll have you take responsibility for that.”

Rentaro was taken aback for a moment, but he soon nodded cheerfully. “All right, I will.”

Suddenly, there was the sound of a gunshot, and Tina fell to her knees.

“Ah……” Tina looked in disbelief at the black hole that had opened up in her chest. The fresh blood leaking from the hole slowly soaked into her clothes. Tina moved her slightly gaping mouth a little, but couldn’t speak as she looked up at Rentaro, then tilted her head in embarrassment as she tried to smile.

A man approached them briskly, wearing a uniform cap with a white cape, shooting a Luger pistol. Fresh blood spouted from Tina’s throat, and she fell backward. Yasuwaki kicked Tina’s stomach hard, sending her body lightly into the air. It landed with a thump when it fell. The whole scene was like a bad joke.

“I can’t believe you’re having so much trouble with a little killer!” said Yasuwaki mockingly.

What’s he doing here…? His brain numb, Rentaro tilted his head in confusion.

Yasuwaki looked in his direction, as if to answer his question. “I safely escorted the Lady Seitenshi to her conference. She is probably in the middle of talks right now. I need to get back before the conference ends, so I don’t have a lot of time. More importantly—” Yasuwaki stopped and grinned evilly. “What’s with that expression? I just disposed of a piece of trash for you. Why don’t you thank me for it?”

When Rentaro heard those words, rage pierced his spine, and his brain lit on fire. “I’ll kill you!” Just as he put his hand to his holster to draw his gun, there was a rustle and an attack from behind. Rentaro gasped as the air was squeezed from his lungs. He looked back and saw a friend of Yasuwaki’s, one of the Seitenshi’s personal guard, with a fist buried in his back. Panting, Rentaro smashed his attacker’s chin with a backward punch, but someone else held down his hips and kicked his legs out from under him. Just as he thought the ground was approaching, a strong force pushed his head down and slammed it into the ground.

A sharp pain shot through his arm, and looking back with effort, he saw that three other guards were on his back, pinning his arms back. Gritting his teeth so

hard he thought he might crack a tooth, he groaned and flailed hard, but they didn't loosen their hold at all. "Yasuwakiiiiiii! You *bastard*!"

Yasuwaki laughed. "This is exactly what it means to profit from someone else's fight."

Just then, Tina's body curved, and she coughed up blood.

Tina! She's alive!

After Yasuwaki looked at his own Luger pistol, he looked at Tina warily. "It really is hard to kill them without Varanium bullets." Then, looking like he just thought of something, he smiled faintly at his friends. "Hey guys, wanna do a biology experiment? The topic is *How many shots does it take to kill a Red-Eye with lead bullets?*"

The other guards' shoulders shook, and they started snickering.

Stepping over Tina's prone body, Yasuwaki pulled the trigger of his gun a few times. Tina's body danced, and fresh blood gushed out and got on Yasuwaki's face. Tina's legs became taut, and they kicked at the ground.

Rentaro yelled. "Stop it…! I'll kill you, Yasuwakiiiiii! You bastard…! I'll kill youuuuuuu!"

Yasuwaki spread his hands and laughed maniacally. "That's it! That's the expression I wanted to see, Rentaro Satomi!" He kept laughing. Yasuwaki lifted the muzzle of his gun and aimed between Tina's eyes. "It's time for the finale!"

"That's enough!"

The roar of the dignified voice made every person at the scene freeze.

Yasuwaki, his subordinate guards, and everyone else froze with their mouths gaping, holding their breaths and looking in the same direction.

"Lady Seitenshi……," someone muttered.

Her beauty was like that of glittering stars, but her piercingly powerful eyes were like lightning. This authority of pure white wasn't supposed to be here—but she was.

Yasuwaki let his gun drop and turned pale as he stepped back.

The binds on Rentaro loosened, and he stood up in a daze. Why was she here right now? Wasn't she in the middle of a conference?

Yasuwaki seemed to have the same questions and started saying agitatedly, "Why in the world…?"

"I heard that you all were acting without permission, so I excused myself from the meeting with President Saitake to come here."

"Impossible! I cannot believe you threw away a conference with the ruler of Osaka Area for the sake of a mere civsec officer!"

"To me, Satomi is not just a mere civsec officer. And I cannot overlook your violence any longer."

The Seitenshi looked sideways at Rentaro. "Satomi, please tell me. You saved my life. What is it that you wish for in return?"

What *did* he want? He made a hard fist. It was obvious. "I want power! I want the power to protect the people I care about!"

The Seitenshi kept her eyes shut for a while. Finally, she opened her eyes and said resonantly, "Satomi, with power comes responsibility. You must not forget that when you swing your sword, it leaves blood behind it. With too much power, one becomes a tyrant, and with too much responsibility, one's heart breaks. From the beginning of the universe, power and responsibility has never been balanced. But you must find that balance." She paused. "Very well, I will give you that power."

The dignified voice resonated in the night sky. "With my prerogative as ruler of Tokyo Area, I waive the written appointment of the IISO and hereby promote Rentaro Satomi from Rank 1,000 to Rank 300. Satomi's top-secret information access key is now at Level 5, and his pseudo-rank has been promoted to first lieutenant. In other words, you are now one rank above Yasuwaki. Do you understand what that means?"

"Yes," said Rentaro.

"Justice without power is not worth anything. Become stronger, Satomi, stronger than anyone."

Rentaro raised his face quietly and the personal guards froze, with Yasuwaki losing all color in his face. Rentaro drew his XD gun and fired three times. One hit Yasuwaki's right shoulder, the second hit his side, and the last blew off the thumb of his right hand from the joint.

"Arghhhhhhhhh!" Yasuwaki screamed.

Rentaro looked coldly sideways at the flustered guards who pointed their guns at him. "Who do you think you're pointing your guns at?"

Surprised, the guards stopped moving.

Rentaro passed by them to stand in front of Yasuwaki, looking down at him. Yasuwaki shuddered, awestruck, and tried desperately to back away. "Ahhhhhh… D-don't come near me… Don't come near meeeeeee!"

Rentaro, with the full moon behind him, raised the muzzle of his gun and aimed at Yasuwaki. His heart was boiling like magma, but his voice was frozen at absolute zero.

"Get out of my sight, and never come near Tina again. If you refuse, I will shoot you to death here and now for refusing to obey orders from a superior officer."

EPILOGUE THE PLACE I CALL HOME

A while after the last bell rang, students left in twos and threes from the Magata High School gate. In the midst of them, there was also a mummified Rentaro Satomi, who had bandages wrapped around his head and various other places on his body. Rentaro put his bag on his back and hunched his shoulders as he walked out the gate and headed toward the shopping district following the highway, turning twice on the street in front of the supermarket and continuing on the narrow path of the shortcut.

He suddenly stopped walking and tilted his head. Sunlight filtered diagonally through the leaves on the tip of the branch of the beech tree on the other side of the fence as they blinked, rustling in the wind.

Sighing, he started walking again. As Rentaro walked, he went over all the things that had happened to him in succession recently.

It had been a week since everything had happened. The other day, there was an official notice from the IISO that publicly raised Rentaro's and Enju's rank to 300. Since there was no flashy ceremony to confer his rank like there had been for the Kagetane Hiruko terrorist incident, only those close to them knew about their rise. He gave his access key to Sumire, so she would probably dredge up the information afforded a Level 5 for him soon.

Sumire said, stunned, "I can't believe you had the nerve to do something as idiotic as defeat a Rank 98 by yourself." Miori also had a similar reaction, but she was even more stubborn in that she was already seriously considering putting him to use in a Shiba Heavy Weapons billboard.

Even more surprising was the Seitenshi, who really did leave her conference with Saitake to come rushing to Rentaro's side. Apparently, Saitake had left in a fit of anger and returned to Osaka Area in a huff.

In the end, there was no material evidence linking Saitake to Rand. According to Kisara, when there is an order for this kind of assassination, there are usually a number of people in between, and even if the end of the chain is caught, that

does not always lead to the original client. If what she said was true, then even if they squeezed Tina for answers, the chances that it would lead them to Saitake were very low.

It was like when someone wanted to do something malicious on the Internet, they would use a decoy server as a springboard until they were found out. Then, they would cut their ties with that server. Tina was the springboard. And like a lizard getting rid of its tail, she was immediately cut off and thrown away.

Even though he knew who the culprit was, he couldn't do anything about it. He'd gotten a taste of this during the terrorist incident before, when he faced off against Kikunojo Tendo.

Kikunojo Tendo—

When Rentaro thought about that man, it always brought up conflicted emotions. Kikunojo loved and respected the Seitenshi and acted as her capable aide. At the same time, he also acted on his extreme prejudice against the Gastrea. Those two souls lived in one body at the same time.

People say that humans are basically good or evil. However, in the end, humans were not good or evil. Based on their positions and values those two could interchange dizzyingly within one person.

So for a moment, imagine the absence of good. How would one define the evil that should be defeated? Where would one draw the line between good and evil?

Rentaro thrust both hands in his pockets as he tilted his head to look at the sky. The only thing that was clear was that Rentaro was definitely not of the same minds as Saitake or Kikunojo, who justified the means with their goals. He would probably have to go up against them again sometime. When that time came, if he could not decide what stance to take, that would likely become a chink in his armor.

It was about time he also solidified his position.

Even though Rentaro didn't remember where he walked or how he got there, before he knew it, he was standing in front of the Tendo Civil Security Agency. Habit was a fearsome thing.

The dear old edifice, Happy Building, had undergone a big change. Thanks to Tina and Kisara going wild, there were pieces breaking off here and there, and the second-floor cabaret seemed to still be open, covered with waterproof blue sheets.

Aimlessly climbing the stairs, Rentaro suddenly wondered if Tina was doing okay.

Tina had survived after her operation. In an unprecedented measure, she had been given over to the Seitenshi's personal care, and was under house arrest at the Seitenshi's palace undergoing an investigation. He hoped that the sentence she received would be generous.

He lightened his mood as he went through the door of the office and was greeted with "Oh, Satomi" and "Rentaro!"—the voices of the recovered Kisara and Enju.

With the anesthetic out of her system, Enju was more or less completely healed, and now that she was out of the hospital, she was back to her usual self. Suddenly, the doctor's words in the hospital room came back to his mind. *"There is one thing we must tell you, Satomi. About your Initiator's body's corrosion rate…"*

In front of him, Enju looked at him puzzled with her wide eyes. "What is the matter, Rentaro? Is there something on my face?"

Rentaro looked at her in silence, finally saying, "No, I was just thinking that the atmosphere of the office is completely different when you're here, compared to when you're not."

Enju looked surprised for a moment, and then laughed. "I see, I see."

Rentaro shook his head to clear it. As he plunked down on the sofa to receive clients and stretched, he heard his bones and joints popping and creaking.

Time to do some more profitless work today again!

"Rentaro, here's some water."

"Oh, thanks. That's thoughtful of you, Tina." He took a gulp of water before he realized what had happened, and the next instant, he spurted water

magnificently from his mouth and nose.

The girl gave a scream as she covered just her face with the tray to protect it from the water. Moving the tray aside a little, she looked up at him.

Blond, with slightly sleepy eyes. It was Tina. There was no mistaking it.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Why are you here?” Rentaro said. He had copied her tone of voice without thinking.

Kisara was all smiles as she went to stand behind Tina and put her hands on the girl’s shoulders, looking at him. “I hired her,” she said in a singsong voice, laughing.

“What do you mean, you hired her…”

If he remembered correctly, Kisara had been half-riddled with holes with a Gatling gun, and Enju had had a hole blown out of her stomach from an antitank rifle. Rentaro had had antitank bullets grazing him at a close distance. Honestly, he was about to cry. Were the girls’ memories so bad that they forgot so quickly about almost getting killed? Or did Kisara and Enju get hit in the head so much by Tina without his knowledge that there was now a problem with their brains? The poor things.

“Hey, Satomi!” Kisara said. “What’s with that look? After Tina was discharged, she had no home to go back to. Don’t you feel bad for her?”

“But…she’s a professional killer,” said Rentaro.

“I do not mind it!” Enju was all smiles as she waved and put her hand on her hip, puffing out her chest. “I finally have a junior. You can call me *Miss* Enju.”

Kisara followed suit, proudly puffing out her chest, closing her eyes, and putting a hand on her chest. “The gangster, Al Capone, also hired the person trying to kill him as a bodyguard, didn’t he? I think I have the capacity to do that, as well.”

Rentaro froze with his mouth gaping slightly open. Then, the girl who had almost killed everyone in the agency stepped forward bashfully. “I will be in the care of the Tendo Civil Security Agency starting today. I look forward to working

with you, Rentaro.”

She bowed once happily.

Rentaro leaned back on the sofa in disgust and exhaustion until the sofa almost tipped over. Looking at the ceiling, he sighed deeply. It was a strange twist of fate, and there was the saying that even chance meetings were preordained—

But don’t blame me if anything happens, Rentaro complained to himself.

At any rate, it looked like the office was going to get noisy.

- *Enju Aihara Gastrea virus corrosion rate: 43.0 percent*
- *Estimated time to functional collapse: 560 days*

AFTERWORD

The entities called novelists all more or less have something called escape material. Escape material is the mental catalyst used as an exodus from the physical world full of fetters to the mental world used by an author who's backed against a wall by an approaching deadline.

What Kanzaki, the author, often uses is the thing where, if you gather seven Dragon Balls, you can make a wish to Shen Long. The list of things to wish for is never ending—eternal youth and longevity, the underwear of a high school girl, the publishing company exploding—but in the end, he narrows it down to the conservative wishes like being able to write three times faster. However, when he's done, he doesn't have an answer; trying to come up with one is the fun part.

When I was writing this book, the schedule was crazy, and I depended a lot on escape material. An author who wishes passionately for Shen Long to appear while staring into space, sitting in the chair at a diner even though the manuscript is due the next day is, conservatively speaking, pretty hopeless.

One day, in a half-groggy state with tired eyes, I said, "Kurosaki, will you help me think of wishes?" trying to pull my editor into the completely unproductive Shen Long space.

But he responded saying, "Okay, once you've successfully finished everything on time, let's think about it together!" pretending to help me up but actually throwing me into hell. Just thinking about how good his retorts were makes me wet my pillow with tears.

This book was created by the aforementioned author and editor.

Also, this book isn't *Black Bulled*, it's *Black Bullet*. Please make sure you annunciate clearly. If you say "bulled," fast and slurred, it can start to sound like "black bread." But I guess that's okay, too. Bread made with brown sugar to look black is superdelicious.

Now, I'll be a little more serious. I'd like to thank my editor, Mr. Kurosaki, whom I am always indebted to; Saki Ukai, who drew the beautiful illustrations; everyone at the publishing company; and everyone else who was involved in creating this book.

And finally, to the readers. I still have a lot of ideas in my head, so please keep looking out for this series.

Thank you very much for buying this book.

I pray that all of my readers will be blessed.

Shiden Kanzaki

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BLACK BULLET, Volume 2

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